2010 marked my five-year anniversary from completing my MA in International Policy Studies at MIIS. My personality always leaves me assessing whether I am heading in the right direction professionally and whether my past efforts resulted in any discernable advancement. The question five years later is: was my time at MIIS earning a graduate degree worth it?

Arriving in Monterey in 2003, I asked myself essentially this same question. Would a graduate degree provide me any benefit in the long run when measured against the costs of attending? I debated for years prior to 2003 whether to apply to graduate school and with every tuition payment return to this central question. In evaluating this question, I can point to both tangible and intangible evidence to support why my time at MIIS has proved immensely valuable.

**Finding the value in my graduate education**

*Know where you came from:*  
Prior to arriving at MIIS, I served in the U.S. Army and the FBI. My prior work experience influenced my desire for a graduate degree but also initially limited my thinking. My immediate response to enrollment was to seek courses that were in alignment with my past. Fortunately, good mentorship by faculty led me to take courses focused on my future profession. After initially believing a national security studies program would be my chosen route, I instead diverted to a security and development concentration. This concentration led me to build skills in my greatest weaknesses rather than reinforcing my strengths, and it provided many more job skills that earned real work opportunities.

*Get skills, not simple knowledge.*  
The allure of courses based on interesting topics can be overpowering for the new graduate student. Courses in trendy, niche topics (like terrorism, a field in which I currently work) remain a huge draw for new students. But, these courses rarely provide students a specific skill that later serves a benefit for employers. However, the courses that get one hired after graduation are those with tangible skills. Several of my MIIS courses proved invaluable after graduation leading to good employment opportunities and interesting research.

*a. Policy Analysis and Research Design-*  
A required course during my MAIPS degree, I’m shocked to say that my research design ability provides me more work than I might ever have imagined. As a research and training manager, I routinely use the principles taught in this course and have earned repeated business by being able to build a coherent research process. My peers from other graduate programs (especially the Ivy’s) cannot create valid research questions, hypotheses, variables or methods for measurement. Their research thus quickly becomes ‘e-research’; a long-winded regurgitation of a topic pulled from the Internet void of originality or experimentation.
Essentially, most research is an expensive version of Wikipedia printed on nice paper wrapped in a flashy cover. When hiring researchers, I have changed my process to not ask about topical content but instead inquire “how would you go about answering the following research question?” The best new hires will walk me through a deliberate method by which they will seek to answer the research question. The average applicant will instead begin reciting facts they know about a given topic. MIIS provides good training in research design and regardless of concentration; this skill will prove handy if learned properly.

**Quantitative/Data Analysis**–
Like most social science graduate students, my initial thought of doing any ‘statistics’ met strongly with painful memories of undergraduate calculus courses. I relented and ultimately took the MIIS data analysis course, which later resulted in huge professional benefits. Policy analysts, researchers, program managers, and even anthropologists handicap themselves if they don’t have at least a basic understanding of quantitative analysis. Understanding statistical analysis, not necessarily mastery, remains a must for most all policy analysts and program managers. Additionally, quantitative analysis masters always find employment as statistics skills remain in high demand and low supply. I have personally used my MIIS data analysis skills in counterterrorism research, program evaluation, polling and survey programs with NGO’s and research report writing. Math is very much like a foreign language. If you can speak it well, then there will likely always be work for you.

**Language Skills**–
By far my weakest academic attribute, MIIS language courses were fantastic for me and actually got me successfully through a job interview in a second language. I entered MIIS the weakest of Spanish speakers (as my classmates I’m sure would confirm with many giggles). But, Professor Vicki Porras whipped me in to shape during the intensive course and by the end of my MIIS time I could survive in Spanish. I like many other grads have let my language skills slip through insufficient practice. However, the linguistic construction and language learning principles I learned at MIIS helped me in research and counterterrorism work assignments.

One caveat; anything short of functional fluency is mostly useless professionally. I routinely staff training and research programs with regional subject matter experts. Everyone claims to have a second language. Few do. My coworkers and I have done initial phone interviews with academics and researchers claiming to be Arabic speakers. When you ask, they always say, “I’m pretty good.” We would then issue these researchers a written test or in real time, conference in a third caller to begin a conversation with them in Arabic. With rare exceptions, they failed miserably. Bottom line: if you are not functionally fluent, then you don’t have a language skill. Don’t even put it on your resume. Hint: if you took one Arabic language class, you don’t know Arabic, don’t put it on your resume, it makes people question the veracity of everything else on your resume.
**Economics, all shapes and sizes-**
I deliberately ran from economics as an undergraduate. Developmental Economics, a required course in the international development concentration, forced me into economics and provided a practical set of principles, which I’ve used repeatedly in Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa research. Ultimately, I enrolled in several economic and trade courses and all proved useful for recognizing and understanding political economy aspects of almost all issues policy analysts may encounter. There remains a high demand for people with quantitative and economic analysis skills. These skills transfer from specialty to specialty so when one’s expertise in a regional topic is in low demand, economics and statistics may get you through leaner times.

**Africa** - As a former military person raised in the cold war era, I knew little if anything about Africa. Through good mentorship and curiosity, I enrolled in Politics of Sub-Saharan Africa. There remains a sharp deficiency in Africa expertise. Despite my limited knowledge, I led Africa related research numerous times based on my MIIS coursework. Africa is not the only area in need. I’m certain expertise is needed in all developing areas of the world. My recommendation is choose your regional focus on both personal interest and labor demand.

**Reflections and Guidance for Post-MIIS:**

*Be realistic about where your degree will take you.*
Each summer I spend a large amount of time visiting different government locations. Too often I encounter the recent graduate student with a masters degree in environmental engineering seeking a slot in counterterrorism analysis. Your prior work experience and your degree specialization provide the path to your next job. I staff research and training teams and receive dozens of resumes annually for review. If you specialize in EU politics, I will not select you to do research on Iraq’s counterinsurgency. Think deliberately and realistically about what professional position you think will come from your education and select your courses accordingly. If I need someone to do EU policy research (which I can’t imagine happening), I’ll get someone from Europe.

*Build your network:*
MIIS alumni come into my orbit occasionally, but not enough. Getting your next policy, program administration or research position comes as much or more from whom you know rather than what you’ve done. Your network will produce far more job interviews than randomly sending resumes to web-based job ads. At the time of my graduation, the MIIS alumni network seemed very weak. Additionally, MIIS’s location on the West Coast, while absolutely the best place anyone can live, places it at a disadvantage for cultivating job leads in the DC and beyond markets. I relied on previous work contacts and my undergraduate alumni networks to find my next position. However, MIIS alumni networks appear to be growing for newer graduates and the Middlebury College merge will likely accelerate this ascendance. That being said, alumni networks are critical in policy, research and development fields. Having a robust alumni network and
encouraging student participation is key for graduates as they embark in government and non-profit circles.

*Last comments:*
After graduation, My MIIS writing assignments provided a valuable demonstration to employers of my research and writing ability. I encourage all grads to use the good work they complete at MIIS to their advantage. Having a well-written, two-page policy analysis document showcasing a particular expertise helps employers recognize your potential. Have these at the ready and they will likely do more for you than your resume.

Lastly, keep your resume to two pages. I consistently get resumes from 24 to 28 year old graduate students that are three to seven pages in length. I immediately tune out. Unless you invented Facebook or Google, I can’t imagine what you might describe about your 4 or less professional years that requires seven pages of detail. My best boss commanded U.S. Special Operations Command and served on the National Security Council and at more than 60 years of age, his resume remained only two pages in length.

Thanks to my professors at MIIS for providing me a valuable graduate education.

Clint Watts  
Managing Director  
Innovative Analytics & Training

Founder and Editor  
SelectedWisdom.com