



Disarmament Education in a Dangerous Era: A "Mapping" study of Non-proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament course offerings at Canadian universities

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Introduction:

The contemporary international security landscape is fraught with conflict and confrontation. The existing arsenals of weapons of mass destruction in particular nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to humanity. Conventional forces are also being increased against a backdrop of “great power rivalry”, nuclear “sabre-rattling” and the dismantlement of the arms control frameworks painstakingly created during the Cold War era.

Given these escalating threats to human security, it is crucial that students specializing in foreign and security policy have opportunities to study these critical issues. It was in this context that The Simons Foundation Canada commissioned the present ‘mapping’ study to assess the current state of Non-proliferation, Arms Control, and Disarmament (NACD) -themed courses available at Canadian universities.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive compilation of relevant courses offered by Canadian universities, encompassing the NACD domains of nuclear, chemical, biological, and conventional weapons. Additionally, it examined courses addressing military applications in both cyberspace and outer space.

This research has been conducted by Alireza Mamdouhi, a second-year Ph.D. student at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Paul Meyer, Adjunct Professor of International Studies and Fellow in International Security at Simon Fraser University. This project has received generous support from The Simons Foundation Canada, echoing the foundation’s dedication to fostering positive change through education in peace, disarmament, international law, and human security.

Methods:

The compiled information was sourced from publicly available data on university websites, after a thorough examination of course descriptions and syllabi. The focus of this scrutiny was on three specific disciplines with the highest likelihood of featuring courses relevant to the study's theme: History, International Relations, and Political Science, spanning both graduate and undergraduate levels.

Throughout the compilation process, key details were gathered, encompassing instructor names, course titles, indications of relevance, department affiliations, and, where accessible, course syllabi. The resultant courses were then categorized into two groups: those entirely centered on NACD subject matter and others that appeared to only partially cover NACD issues within broader contexts.

Despite diligent efforts to present comprehensive information, certain data proved inaccessible, and some course details were insufficient to make firm judgments as to the covered content. A “partial” designation was utilized to indicate courses that appeared to cover NACD material in part.

Results:

The findings align closely with the initial hypothesis of the project, revealing a significant underrepresentation of Non-proliferation, Arms Control & Disarmament (NACD) subject matter within the curriculum of Canadian universities. Among the 95 universities examined across the country, a striking 53 percent—51 institutions—did not offer any relevant courses on NACD issues. Out of the 137 identified relevant courses, 23 were exclusively dedicated to NACD, constituting 16 percent of the total. The remaining courses provided partial coverage of NACD topics, with only four courses offering detailed syllabi, while other relevant information was gleaned from online course descriptions.

Among the provinces, Ontario leads with a comprehensive offering of 67 courses on NACD. Following closely, British Columbia secures the second position with 18 courses, while Quebec claims the third spot with 15 courses. This distribution highlights a significant disparity in coverage, as the remaining provinces collectively contribute only 37 courses dedicated to NACD topics.

In Atlantic Canada, encompassing New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, the 15 universities offer a total of 20 courses, contributing to the regional landscape of NACD education. Moving westward, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the territories together provide 17 courses, with only three of them fully concentrated on the NACD issues. This further underscores the pronounced variations in the availability of NACD-related courses across different regions of the country, reflecting the diverse academic landscapes and priorities in addressing arms control and disarmament.

The Royal Military College of Canada led in the number of courses on NACD, offering a total of 23 courses, with 6 courses exclusively dedicated to the subject. The University of Waterloo in Ontario closely followed with 9 relevant courses, while on the west coast, Simon Fraser University in British Columbia provided 8 pertinent courses.

Partial coverage of NACD-related topics was observed in courses across various departments. History courses, for instance, explored the issue within the context of the Cold War dynamics, particularly assessing proliferation issues amid Soviet-American hostilities. Within the realm of Political Science, themes partially covering NACD included security, international institutions, war and peace studies, as well as international conflict management and resolution.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the comprehensive examination of course offerings in History, International Relations, and Political Science across Canadian universities has revealed an underrepresentation of Non-proliferation, Arms Control & Disarmament (NACD) within academic curricula. More than half of the universities surveyed, comprising 53 percent, did not provide any courses directly addressing this major international security issue. The limited availability of dedicated courses underscores a significant gap in the education of future leaders, policymakers, and scholars on matters of international security and arms control. While some institutions, notably in Ontario, demonstrated a considerable commitment to NACD education, the overall distribution revealed pronounced disparities among provinces and regions, and for many students it would be a challenge to educate themselves about NACD issues relying only on the course offerings of their universities.

The compilation of this data represents an initial effort to “map” the educational landscape for NACD study in Canada. We welcome any feedback and additional information from the university communities on NACD-related course offerings. The absence of clear and accessible information from some institutions could pose a barrier to aspiring students and researchers seeking to engage with these critical topics. Furthermore, the predominance of courses providing only partial coverage of NACD issues, often within broader contexts, suggests a need to integrate more in-depth coursework addressing the complexities of arms control and disarmament. As we navigate an era where global security threats not only persist but in many instances are increasing, this study underscores the need for Canadian universities to reassess and enhance their curriculum. A strengthened and revitalized curriculum would help ensure that interested students are equipped with a comprehensive understanding of NACD, preparing them to contribute meaningfully to global efforts to promote international peace and security.

Biographical Notes:

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