Three years ago, the Wall Street Journal ran an article on a business seminar held in Lausanne, Switzerland. Rather than concentrate on the meat of the proceedings, its reporter noted at length the opinions of the European participants on their American counterparts. “Many expressed envy of American technology, entrepreneurial spirit, productivity but they also spoke disparagingly of American businessmen.” Among the characteristics they found most troubling were a certain provincialism and an ignorance of the world beyond their national borders. Just over a year later, the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon provoked not only shock and outrage but, in parts of the press and among university communities, a call to reassess how well the United States understands the rest of the world.

At IU Bloomington, that issue was already being addressed; a new international studies minor, introduced in 1999 at the Center for the Study of Global Change, had been very successful in introducing a global focus and new perspectives to the studies of many students. In early 2001, discussions began around the idea of an international studies major. “There was a feeling amongst a fairly large number of faculty that it’d be a good thing to have,” says Dan Knudsen, professor of geography and the first director of the international studies major. “We have a rich international community at IU and a set of professors interested in international issues, thanks to Herman Wells. We had all this scattered expertise, and the major was seen as a way to bring it all together.”

One can’t help but ask, in the light of IU’s obvious strengths in international topics, why this hasn’t happened before, particularly given the fact that other universities with fewer resources have had IS majors for years. Jeff Wasserstrom, director of IUB’s East Asian Studies Center, offers one explanation: The people who would have been lobbying for an IS major, he thinks, would probably have done so out of a need for a community of like-minded faculty; at IU, he suggests, “they have mostly not suffered from a lack of fellow specialists,” because the international programs are so well developed.

An exploratory committee, chaired by Wasserstrom, began to map out the territory of the proposed new major. “We took into account other institutions across the board and tried to construct a program different from all of them,” he says. Knudsen says of these other institutions, “More often than not, they offer international relations, which is a different subject. These places usually have a very strong political science or diplomacy department.”

But the College was in a position, it realized, to offer something different; wider in scope, with politics and diplomacy only two elements in a much bigger picture. “We wanted a strong arts and humanities component, and something that would
take in the beliefs and traditions of other cultures,” says Wasserstrom. “Globalization has meant a flow of ideas, images, and artistic creations as well as commerce and conflict.” In that sense, he argues, “it’s more what a liberal arts college would do. It’s playing to the strengths of the College.” One of those strengths is an attention to interdisciplinary study, which suits the international arena down to the ground, since it can equip students with knowledge that cuts across geographic regions and national perspectives. Wasserstrom explains that the committee “decided against geographical tracks per se — we wanted to keep it interdisciplinary.” This first committee defined some specific objectives for the new major; to develop in students an appreciation of the complex connections between the local, the national, and the global; to train a new, skilled generation of foreign-language speakers; to encourage each student to become familiar with one geographic area or culture; to foster critical thinking about, and creative solutions to, real-world problems; and to equip students with a full set of skills for communication and collaboration in any environment.

A second committee, chaired by Knudsen, formed things up and planned a curriculum as part of a proposal document to present to the Indiana Higher Education Commission. By this time, more than 50 faculty members had signed up to teach the core and elective courses. Around this time, College Dean Kumble R. Subbaswamy gave his full support to the project, at what Knudsen calls “a very critical moment.” (This came as no surprise; Dean Subbaswamy oversaw the establishment of international studies majors at two institutions earlier in his career, the universities of Kentucky and Miami at Coral Gables.)

The proposal document made a persuasive case. IU’s resources for international studies include federally funded national resource centers in African studies, Central Eurasian studies, Latin American and Caribbean studies, and Russian and East European studies. That’s not to mention programs for the study of Near Eastern languages and cultures, India studies, East Asian studies, West European studies, and American studies. Then there’s one of the jewels in IU’s international crown — the Mathers Museum, dedicated to world cultures. The Mathers collections contain 20,000 objects and 10,000 photographs representing cultures from every continent. Complementing the museum’s holdings are the Main Library collections, which include one of the strongest African collections in the United States, more than half a million volumes on the Middle East, 190,000 for Asia, and 9,000 for Tibet, in addition to 168,000 volumes on Western Europe. A full list of IU’s international credentials would take up the rest of this article, and then some. Suffice it to say that, in late 2002, the Higher Education Commission approved IU’s new international studies major.

Things had still been in the early stages when the events of Sept. 11 changed the world picture for countless people, both here and abroad. The need for Americans to develop a greater global awareness suddenly became that much more urgent. “After 9/11, I feel even more passionate than I did before about this,” says Wasserstrom. “You need more information than you can get from a soundbite-driven media. For our faculty, the common theme is that information in the modern age is truncated and simplistic. There’s a lack of historical dimension. Students need to learn that there’s a history of violence spilling across borders, that there are connections between past and present.”

So what does the new major look like? “There are seven thematic concentrations, each with their own core course,” Knudsen explains. “After this broad-based introduction, students choose one theme and one region to focus on.” The seven themes are: culture and the arts; global environment; global markets and governance; human rights and social movements; international communication; nations, states, and boundaries; and rituals and beliefs. Students also need to fulfill a language requirement that develops their proficiency in a previously studied language or introduces them to a new one. A crucial component — and a big attraction for students — is the study-abroad requirement, “to see how things work on the ground,” says Knudsen. Finally, they must take a capstone course in their final year.

“Our goal is to train people to be citizens of the world, not just of the United States,” says Knudsen. Career prospects for graduates are also good; international corporations like their employees to be globally aware, and the same is increasingly true of the many U.S. government offices. Charities and non-governmental organizations, communications and computer companies, film and recording industries — the fact is, we live in such a networked world that there are few major employers who wouldn’t value an international studies major on their staff.

This fall, some 20-30 majors are expected in the first intake, some of which will be double majors. As to which themes and regions will be most popular, Knudsen is realistic. “Clearly students will have preferences driven by language and by where the overseas studies opportunities are. Europe will probably be the most common choice in the first three to five years.” He hopes that, over time, Africa and Asia will become popular choices too. “But right now we don’t have a whole lot of students saying ‘Boy, I would really like to take Azari (the national language of Azarbaijan).’”

But who knows what these young Americans will find to get excited about? The core courses will introduce them to so many new ideas and cultures that scholarly passions could be ignited all across campus. Outreach to high schools won’t begin until next year; when that happens, says Knudsen, “We can show high schools the vast range of things they can take at IU — like the 70 different languages we teach here — and say ‘Look at all of this — take your pick.’” The world, in other words, will be their oyster.