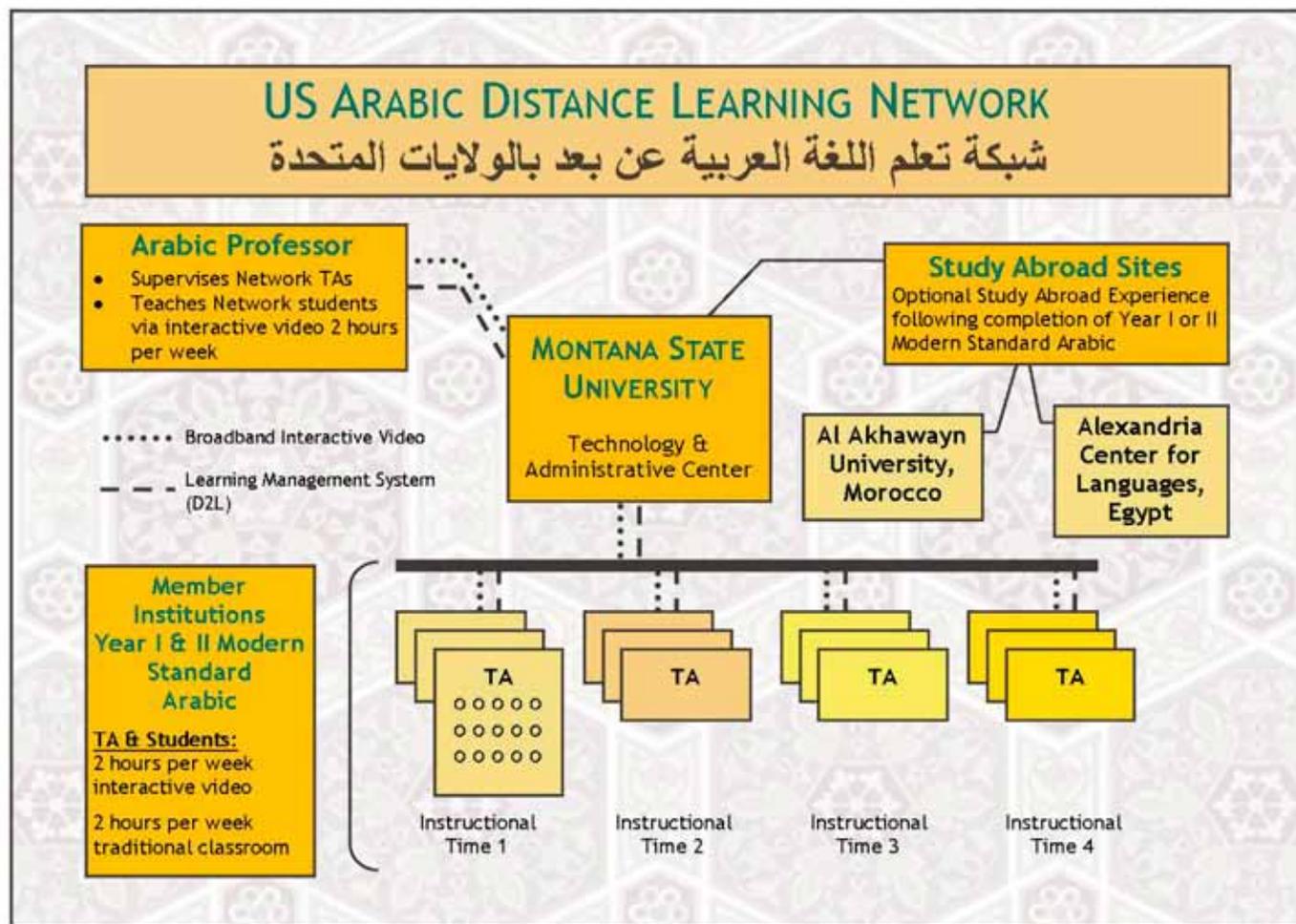


Geographers Help Map Distance Language Learning Network

SHORTLY AFTER ACCEPTING THE OFFER to lead international programs at Montana State University in 1994, a member of the faculty came by to discuss an opportunity to develop a partnership with a university in North Africa. The opportunity was based on the relationship between the faculty member, Will Swearingen, and a Moroccan fellow geographer, Abdellatif Bencherifa, which had developed through their common academic interests. From this conversation a wonderfully productive partnership between Montana State University and Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, came into being. It, in turn, spawned the development of a major Arabic language program utilizing distance education technologies now involving a network of partner universities across the United States, which offers the opportunity for hundreds of students to learn Arabic each year.



The Initial Opportunity

As Will Swearingen discussed it, the opportunity seemed intriguing. The university in Morocco was brand new; in fact, it had not yet opened. It had come into being through an amazing chain of events that began with the wreck of a Saudi oil tanker off the coast of Morocco. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia wanted to compensate Morocco for this disaster. Moroccan King Hassan II suggested that he would like to build a new university with the funds. So the university became Al Akhawayn University—in Arabic the “two brothers” for King Hassan and King Fahd. Departing from Morocco’s long-standing Francophone traditions, the university’s language of instruction was to be English, and it was to be patterned on a U.S. curricular model. This new university seemed to offer promising opportunities for U.S. students to study in Arabic-speaking North Africa in a safe, secure environment while continuing to make progress toward their degrees through a broad array of courses taught in English. Al Akhawayn offered a substantial curriculum in business, engineering, science, and the humanities, so it provided the courses many of our students needed to keep on their degree tracks.

In January 1995 I found myself shaking hands with dignitaries from across the Middle East and North Africa at the official opening of the university. During the festivities the partnership agreement between Al Akhawayn and Montana State was signed. By the time I returned to Ifrane to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the partnership, more than 250 students, faculty, and staff had taken part in the exchange. So, the initial conversation with a geography professor in Bozeman, Montana, has become a partnership that has changed the lives of many people. Of course, in the intervening years Al Akhawayn has become very well-known, and it now has an impressive list of partner universities in the United States and around the world.

Realizing Greater Potential

But this is only part of the story. Being able to send our students to study at a new English language university in Morocco was a

The bigger story is how this modest but productive partnership between a university in the northern Rocky Mountains and another perched high in the Middle Atlas Mountains of Morocco became a much bigger partnership between a large network of universities with very ambitious language and cultural learning goals.

wonderful opportunity for our students. However, we had a growing realization that the potential of the partnership was much greater than this, and we at Montana State began to look for ways to realize this potential. The bigger story is how this modest but productive partnership between a university in the northern Rocky Mountains and another perched high in the Middle Atlas Mountains of Morocco became a much bigger partnership between a large network of universities with very ambitious language and cultural learning goals.

Our focus turned to Arabic language and Middle East/North African studies. Of course, it would have been ideal to send our Arabic language students to Al Akhawayn to further their Arabic studies. The only problem with this idea is that we didn’t have any to send because we didn’t offer Arabic at Montana State. Like many universities and colleges around the United States, we only offered the traditional European languages (Spanish, French, and German), plus Japanese. Al Akhawayn offers an excellent Arabic program, including introductory courses for students just beginning Arabic, but sending students to Morocco for a semester or two of Arabic in Morocco with no options for further study was not very appealing.

We, therefore, began to consider the possibilities for starting an Arabic program at Montana State University. We briefly explored the idea of creating a regular faculty position in Arabic, but it became clear that this was not an affordable option for us, given our limited budget and competing



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priorities in other academic areas. Finding a local native Arabic speaker to hire on an adjunct basis was a more affordable option, but it provided no assurance of instructional quality, especially for such a challenging language. Our experience with other languages using adjunct instructors had been disappointing. Like many other universities trying to expand their languages offerings, we found ourselves on the horns of a dilemma, with unaffordability on one side and mediocrity on the other.

So, we asked ourselves, is there a way to resolve this dilemma through a larger partnership that could spread the costs of a quality Arabic program? In answering this question, the foundation for what has become the U.S. Arabic Distance Learning Network was laid. The idea emerged for a new approach to Arabic language instruction built around a network of partner universities. We reasoned that there are four elements that, if properly combined, had the potential to provide the fundamental structure for such a network. First, there are Arabic experts located around the United States in Title VI centers and other academic centers who can provide instructional expertise on a part-time basis, and many of them have outreach obligations built into their funding. Second, there are

excellent interactive video facilities and other distance learning technologies on many campuses to link these experts to classrooms and students. Third, there are native Arabic-speaking international students (such as the exchange students sent to us by Al Akhawayn University) who could provide quality supplementary instruction under the direction of a fully credentialed Arabic language expert. It is often noted that we do not take full advantage of these students on our campuses. And fourth, there are student exchange and education abroad programs, such as ours with Al Akhawayn University, to provide opportunities for students to continue their study of Arabic in an environment in which the language is spoken.

A pilot Arabic network built upon these elements was established in 1999 with a grant from the National Security Education Program. A professor of Arabic at the University of Washington taught introductory Modern Standard Arabic to students for two hours per week on seven partner campuses through interactive video classrooms. At each location a native Arabic-speaking foreign student provided two hours of additional instruction per week, supplementing the instruction of the lead professor from the University of Washington. A special training program prior to the start of the

academic year was conducted by the lead instructor to prepare these local instructors and build the instructional team. Students completing the first two semesters of Arabic had the opportunity to continue their Arabic studies at Al Akhawayn University for summer, semester, or academic year programs. Students continued their study of Modern Standard Arabic and had the option to study Moroccan Arabic as well. The results were very encouraging. The network students across the country on average actually out-performed students in regular classes at the University of Washington on mid-term and final examinations.

In 2002 the network was honored by being selected to be the inaugural recipient of the Institute of International Education's Andrew Heiskell Award for internationalizing the campus.

Based on the success of the NSEP-funded pilot project, the Arabic network project in 2004 was awarded a grant from the prestigious FIPSE Comprehensive Program to build the network and take it to a self-sustaining level.

Continuing to Hone A Successful Model

Several major enhancements to the network have been made over time. Nabil Abdelfattah, an internationally respected Arabic language professor based in the San Francisco area, was appointed as the network's lead professor. The interactive video classroom transmissions were moved from phone line to broadband Internet, greatly increasing transmission quality and decreasing cost. An asynchronous learning management software system, now based on Desire2Learn, has been added to facilitate communication between the lead professor, the local instructors, and the students. A new education abroad option at the Alexandria Language Center has been added, providing students the opportunity to extend their Arabic through an eight-week intensive summer program. This year an option was added for network members to offer the second year of Modern Standard Arabic based on the same model as the first-year program.



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Since its inception, the network has provided Arabic instruction and education abroad opportunities to more than 1,500 students at Montana State and other network partners across the United States. Although funding limitations have not allowed us to conduct proficiency testing of all students, many students achieve ACTFL proficiency levels of intermediate-low to intermediate-mid at the end of the year-one program. Many network graduates have gone on to careers relating to the Arabic-speaking world in agriculture, architecture, health, and other fields.

This year the network provides the Arabic program at eight universities around the United States enrolling more than 200 students. Each participating campus pays an annual network membership fee to Montana State, currently \$7,500, which covers the cost of the lead instructor, interactive video delivery, and administration of the program, including coordination of education abroad programs. Although additional local costs (e.g. stipend for the local instructor, use of campus interactive video facilities, etc.) vary, total cost to offer the year one program and follow-on education abroad options is about \$15,000—a quarter or less of the cost of a faculty position for a fully credentialed professor of Arabic.

In addition to the immediate impact of the network in providing the opportunity to study Arabic for hundreds of U.S. students who would not otherwise be able to do so, the network demonstrates a new methodology for language instruction built around international partnerships and technology that provides a quality and affordable way to offer major world languages across the fabric of U.S. higher education, not only in a few specialized institutions.

Those wanting additional information on the U.S. Arabic Distance Learning Network are encouraged to consult the network's Web site, www.arabicstudies.edu and are welcome to contact program staff at Montana State through it.

So, what began as a small institutional partnership between one university in the American West and another in Morocco has been transformed into a network of uni-

versities offering hundreds of students per year the opportunity to learn Arabic. The original partnership is still in place between Al Akhawayn University and Montana State University, still allowing students, faculty, and staff of both institutions to have valuable exchange experiences. Recently Montana State University hosted Al Akhawayn's heads of campus security and purchasing for professional development programs with their counterparts in Montana. But the partner-

ship has been the impetus for a far larger partnership that impacts students across the United States and builds closer ties between the people of the United States and the Middle East and North Africa. Further, it points the way for innovative new programs to offer languages built around international partnerships and new educational technologies. **IE**

NORMAN PETERSON, PhD, is vice provost for international education at Montana State University.

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