

U.S. Public Diplomacy Depends on Citizens Learning Other Languages

IN SEPTEMBER 2009 Robert Mueller, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) responded to a question during a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding Arabic language capacity in the United States. He commented that the number of people with Arabic fluency in the United States was small and that the FBI had reached its limit in recruiting them. In response to the question from Senator Al Franken, Mueller went on to state that the nation is woefully short of speakers of Arabic, Pashto, Hindi, and other critical languages.

Mueller's answer to the Senate Judiciary Committee was not surprising. What was surprising was how quickly the questioning moved to another topic. There was no acknowledgment by Mueller, Franken, or members of the Committee of the seriousness of the lack of national language capacity or how to address it.

For the past several years, including as recently as last September, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has issued a series of reports documenting how the shortage of expertise in Arabic and other critical languages was affecting the capacity of the United States to conduct diplomatic relations, gather intelligence, and further its policy objectives. The title of the GAO report issued in September, *Department of State: Persistent Staffing and Foreign Language Gaps Compromise Diplomatic Readiness*, summed up the findings.

We believe that at a time of global engagement that is economic, cultural, and diplomatic, it is increasingly clear that there should be a dramatic increase in the teaching of world languages in the United States. Across the country, however, this is not the case. In early September, *The New York Times* reported on the cutback of elementary language classes in the tri-state area of Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. Attributed to shrinking budgets, school boards are opting to cut language teachers, which means instructional time is less and the teaching of less popular languages is being phased out. What is happening in states along the Atlantic coast is occurring in school districts nationally. The ultimate result



is that fewer primary and secondary school-age students will be formally instructed in foreign languages.¹

At the postsecondary level, a 2006 survey by the Modern Languages Association revealed that language enrollment at 2,795 colleges and universities as a percentage of enrollments has fallen since 1965 from 16.5 percent compared with 8.6 percent the year of the study. The survey indicated that while language enrollment in real numbers had increased because of the growth in the overall student population, there were noticeable increases from 1998–2006 for varying reasons worth noting: growing importance of

¹ The Center for Applied Linguistics's report *World Language Teaching in U.S. Schools* (2010) states between 1997–2008, the percentage of public elementary schools offering world languages decreased from 24 percent to 15 percent (reflecting decisions taken by local school boards). Foreign language leaders also confirmed this trend in interviews.

Spanish in the United States (Spanish language increased 25 percent to 822,985), rise of Asian economies (Chinese increased 81 percent to 51,582), and response to the September 11, 2001, attacks (Arabic increased 335 percent to 23,974). The real numbers are clearly too low to meet the critical language requirements of the federal government and business well beyond the foreseeable future. The problem is especially notable for those less commonly taught languages (or LCTLs) such as Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Pashto, Swahili, Korean, or Farsi, to name a few.

President Barack Obama has made it a hallmark of his administration to re-engage the world. In his first year in office Mr. Obama projected a powerful international image by chairing a UN Security Council committee on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament, hosting the G-20 in Pittsburgh, and travelling to Russia, Ghana, France, Denmark, and Egypt to name a few

countries. The president has portrayed a positive image of this country on behalf of all citizens. He has been a visible and vibrant reminder that each citizen has a vital role to play in the realm of “public diplomacy.”

In a complex, interdependent world that recognizes the role of popular culture, Internet, communications, and service industries that include, but are not limited to, education and tourism there needs to be an encompassing advocacy for public diplomacy. But this requires an honest assessment of the ability of the U.S. educational system (K–12 and higher education) to prepare every citizen to contribute to American public diplomacy.

In her remarks in June before the Center for a New American Security, Judith McHale, under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs stated: “The more languages and venues we communicate in, the more respect we show for our audience, the more

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effective we will be.” She went on to say, “And in our on-the-ground engagement, we need to build on the historic success of exchange programs such as Fulbright and reach wider and deeper into societies.” McHale recognized that new communication technologies are critical to engaging people around the world. She added: “One of our most effective tools of relationship building is English language training. Even in the most difficult of settings, we find that people value these skills and see them as building blocks to a better life.”

While the expenditure of funds to teach English around the world may be commendable, it is equally, if not more, important to change the national dynamic contributing to U.S. language incompetency.

All educators in the United States should be alarmed by the historic lack of commitment to the study of languages. At a time when the federal government needs greater engagement from the population in global affairs, state, and local governments, and school boards are faced with the difficult challenge of

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how to manage increasingly shrinking education budgets. Too often the result is that K–12 schools will offer less language instruction.

It is possible in more than half of our states to complete K–12 without a day of foreign language instruction. An October 2009 editorial in the *Hartford Courant* wondered why the recommendation from the thoughtful report *A Nation at Risk*, published by The National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983, of a foreign language requirement for admission to college has, after 26 years, yet to be implemented. The editorial informed readers that “to graduate from high school, a Connecticut student must have one credit in physical education and one in art or vocational education—but none in foreign language.”

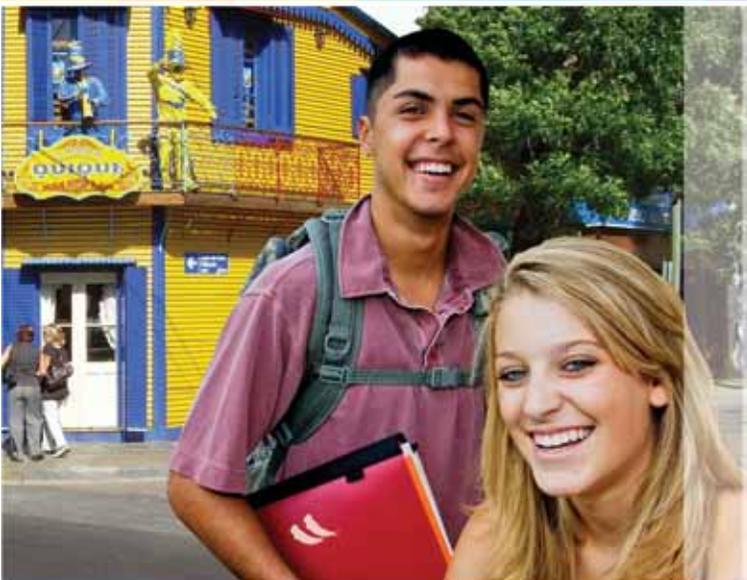
Because of the number of institutions of higher education in the United States (more than 4,000), their wide dispersal across the nation, and their ability to attract students of every age, income level, and interest, they are uniquely positioned to play a vital national role in embracing and

supporting public diplomacy. Yet it is striking how a majority of U.S. colleges and universities continue to struggle to find ways to prepare students for success in our globalizing economy and society, which has been confirmed in many reports in periodicals in recent years.

Education abroad figures, while encouraging, still need to be considered in the context of developing foreign language competency and facility. During the 2007–2008 academic year, 262,416 students studied abroad for academic credit. While this figure represents an increase of 8.5 percent over the previous year, the total continues to be less than 1 percent of all registered students in the United States. Even more alarming, that same academic year, 96 percent of the students studied abroad for a semester or

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less with the majority of all students (56 percent) opting for “less” time abroad on programs that lasted one to eight weeks. In other words, only 4 percent of those who studied abroad in 2007–2008 did so for an academic year and 40 percent for a semester.

Since 9/11, there have been several important reports that have called for increased language study not only for its educational value but because having more citizens able to speak other languages is in the national interest. All international educators (K–12 and higher education) should make it a priority to study the following reports and then advocate that the recommendations be enacted at their schools and in supporting organizations across the country.

In 2003 the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, chaired by former U.S. Ambassador Edward P. Djerejian presented its report, on *Changing Minds Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the*

Arab and Muslim World, to the House of Representatives. The highly regarded Djerejian report stated: “The problem of inadequate language competency is widespread, not just in the U.S. government but throughout American society.”

The bipartisan National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (also known as the 9/11 Commission) in its 2004 report stressed the need for increasing the number of speakers with advanced levels of language proficiency to serve the needs of national security.

From the private sector, the Committee of Economic Development issued a call in 2006 for foreign language competencies. This report, *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security*, stated “It is increasingly important that America be better versed in the languages and cultures of other world regions, particularly the

Middle East, so we can present our nation more clearly to the world.”

The urgency of dramatically expanding foreign language training was reflected in a study released this past April entitled *Building the Foreign Language Capacity We Need: Toward a Comprehensive Strategy for a National Language Framework* by Frederick Jackson of the University of Maryland and Margaret Malone of the Center for Applied Linguistics. In 2007 the National Research Council published a report *International Education and Foreign Language: Keys to Securing America’s Future* by Mary Ellen O’Connell and Janet Norwood.

The above mentioned reports are only a few among many from academia, business, and government that have stressed the urgency of language training for all students if the United States expects to be a secure nation and contribute to the compelling transnational issues that face the peoples of all nations. Each report has offered numer-

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ous recommendations and strategies that have yet to be implemented.

In this critical time and increased awareness of global matters there are unfortunate tensions between national priorities that are countered by state and local decisionmaking and fiscal concerns. Just as the federal government's economic stimulus program is pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into the economy, state and local governments are slashing budgets that too often directly affect education. How can the "public" aspect of U.S. public diplomacy succeed when the world language capacities pale in comparison to countries where large percentages of their populations are bilingual and often trilingual?

Fortunately, there has been federal support to promote foreign language study such as the National Security Education Program (NSEP), The Language Flagship, the National Security Language Initiative, and the federally funded STARTALK program of the National Foreign Language

Center. And education abroad enrollment has been highlighted by the passage last year of the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act by the House of Representatives, which awaits passage by the Senate.

While the benefits to the United States of expanding the public diplomacy infrastructure—namely the human capital exchange programs offer valuable opportunities for people-to-people diplomacy. More than a footnote in our public diplomacy history, such exchanges were instrumental in, for example, the U.S. engagement with the newly formed countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the peaceful transition from apartheid in South Africa.

Now is the time for a bold vision that would require language training for all students—K–12 and higher education. Every citizen should be taught to speak another language in ways that are appropriate for anticipated usage. While each educational

institution will find different ways to educate for global competence and language ability, the following areas need particular attention by all educational institutions.

Federal Leadership

Congress should be encouraged to consider reinstating the provision for an Assistant Secretary for Foreign Language and International Education that had been included in the International Leadership Act of 2008. The position would have leadership, coordinating, assessment, and reporting responsibilities that would allow for tracking areas critical to the nation's public diplomacy and national security infrastructure, including: language teacher needs, language enrollments, and assessment for global competencies.

K-12 Foreign Language: State and Local Leadership

State leaders and education decisionmakers increasingly play leading roles in determin-

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ing their state's capacity to be competitive in a global economy. Federal efforts to address the country's foreign language capacity should encourage and be in concert with those undertaken by state legislatures, State Boards of Education, and local school boards, which ultimately authorize world language requirements and allocate financing for language offerings and teaching.

College and University Language Requirements

At the higher education level a foreign language should be required for every degree candidate (associate's, bachelor's, and graduate). Incentives should be offered to students that make language study academically exciting and professionally necessary. Those students who choose to study LCTLs should receive appropriate incentives such as scholarship support to study in a country where the language is spoken. Community colleges, which now enroll more than half the post-secondary students in the United States, are strongly encouraged to be engaged and to require language study of at least one year for graduation with an associate's degree.

Teaching of Foreign Languages

Schools of Education should continue to find ways to creatively include local K-12 schools and teachers in language classes, faculty groups studying abroad, and curriculum development for global competence. The 2008 report of the Longview Foundation on *Teacher Preparation for the Global Age: The Imperative for Change* details such efforts.

Collaborations among community colleges and nearby four-year institutions should be encouraged, developed, and expanded. Creating and sustaining programs for global competence and language study will require resources that are likely to be beyond the reach of any one institution.

Languages Across the Campus

All new faculty members who do not have a second language should be encouraged to learn one. The effort should be considered as important as teaching, service, and scholarship and integral to the tenure process. Equally, encouragement to learn a language should be



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given to faculty on tenure track and those who are tenured. Funds for language study should be a priority for faculty development with opportunities for them to live and travel in the countries where the languages they are learning are spoken. Senior administrators, too, should participate in this type of initiative.

Education Abroad

Every institution of higher education and educational association and organization should communicate with their respective senators to pass the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act. This visionary act would support education abroad for 1 million students over ten years. It takes time to learn another language, understand other cultures and histories, and acquire a deep empathy for how others live. Moreover, educators should be concerned that the majority of students that go abroad for academic credit return after four weeks or less with a superficial glimpse of another place, remaining unaware

and insensitive of “others” and their view of the world. The Paul Simon Study Abroad Act by itself will increase U.S. education abroad by more than 30 percent annually.

Foreign Students and Scholars

Foreign students are a vital part of the internationalization of schools and campuses. They serve as resources, especially for teaching languages and promoting cultural understanding. U.S. colleges and universities seem to be passively watching as other countries, notably Canada, Britain, and Australia, aggressively entice and successfully recruit foreign students. A recently released report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted that in 1999, one of every four students that studied abroad came to the United States. Ten years later, while the actual number of students worldwide that study abroad had increased, the United States received only one in five foreign students.

Outlook for the Future

The challenges within K–12 and higher education to the vital importance of all dimensions of international education will continue to manifest itself in a citizenry that is unprepared and incapable of understanding and embracing the importance of participating in “public diplomacy.” Just as importantly, uninformed citizens are unable to hold the government accountable for crafting coherent foreign policies.

For public diplomacy to be successful, all citizens need to be educated for global competency, which includes facility in a foreign language. Only then will all citizens be able to contribute positively to the international reputation of the nation and by extension its health and well-being now and into the future. **IE**

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