

The Chronicle Review

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i29/29b01001.htm>

From the issue dated March 24, 2006

THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CHALLENGE

What America Must Do to Achieve Competence

By RONALD D. LIEBOWITZ

At the U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Education, in January, which I attended, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings set out to make Americans' foreign-language competency a central component of U.S. national policy. If what they proposed comes to fruition, the United States would be more secure and better able to compete in the global marketplace. Americans would also engage the world in a fundamentally different way — with more linguistic and cultural competence and, as a result, with greater confidence.

The summit emphasized, in the words of Karen Hughes, under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, the government's and higher education's common interest in "seeking investment in educating globally competitive U.S. students to work in fields of international interest." Concurrently, President Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative, described as "a plan to further strengthen national security and prosperity in the 21st century through education, especially in developing foreign-language skills." Such a plan to develop a far more linguistically competent American population is unparalleled; working out the details will not be easy.

The program is first and foremost about national security and positioning the United States to avoid serious intelligence gaps like those it experienced leading up to September 11, 2001. But it is also about our country's ability to compete globally in business, diplomacy, scientific research, and other creative endeavors. A major goal of the program is to produce 2,000 advanced speakers of critical languages — including Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Farsi, Hindi, and several Central Asian languages — by 2009.

As president of Middlebury College, an institution known for its excellence in language teaching and for preparing so many of our country's secondary-school language teachers, I naturally support publicizing the need to increase linguistic competency. However, it is precisely my institution's expertise in language education that makes me realize that the new program must ultimately focus on K-12 rather than postsecondary education if the country is to develop and sustain a significant number of linguistically competent citizens. Research shows that people must begin serious language study well before college in order to become competent at the level sought through the program.

However, because the United States — unlike many European and Asian countries — has never made it a priority to encourage its citizens to learn foreign languages, there is an obvious shortage of Americans who can speak and teach the critical languages that President Bush has identified.

Middlebury's experience in trying to expand the size of its Arabic school, an intensive nine-week summer program, is illustrative. Our campus could easily accommodate 400 students in the program each summer, but because of the shortage of qualified teachers of Arabic, we have been unable to make space for more than 120 students. The situation for Chinese, according to a recent report by the Asia Society, is not much better, nor is it for Farsi, Hindi, and the increasingly strategic languages of Central Asia.

A major question, then, is who will teach those who are supposed to become the advanced speakers of the critical languages? The Bush administration recognizes the challenge: The new program calls for increasing the number of foreign-language teachers by establishing a National Language Service Corps. However, the question still remains: Who will teach those who will eventually make up such a corps?

When the scarcity of teachers was mentioned at the summit, a State Department representative could say only that developing a national online clearinghouse would deliver foreign-language distance-education resources to teachers and students to fill the void. Such resources would be useful to speakers who have attained a certain level of proficiency, but learning languages — especially the critical languages, whose structure is particularly complex — requires significant face-to-face instruction, beyond even the best available online resources.

The United States cannot produce a large number of speakers of the critical languages in a short period of time. Colleges and universities should help to the extent they can, but because their capacities are limited and distributed over many campuses, it is important that the Bush administration's program not be a "let a thousand flowers bloom" sort of program. By distributing the \$114-million proposed for foreign-language education from kindergarten to college to a large number of institutions, the program would probably yield fewer results than if larger sums were allocated to a small group of participants whose expertise and resources can complement one another's and help create the best road map for the future. Therefore, before allocating the funds, the appropriate federal agencies should convene a group of college administrators, presidents, provosts, and deans whose institutions specialize in language pedagogy to collaborate on creating the strongest possible infrastructure to meet the short-term goals of the program.

Beyond asking colleges and universities to use their collective resources to produce a new cadre of speakers of critical languages, we must begin what will be the long process of changing the way Americans view the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Language programs must begin before college, preferably in elementary school.

Some school systems have already recognized the strategic significance of critical-language study. Approximately 3,000 K-12 students in Chicago now study Chinese, and

a growing number of school districts on the West Coast offer classes in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Such programs, especially because they challenge the conventional thinking and practice of most Americans, need support from multiple sources, including private donors, corporations, and nonprofit foundations.

Federal and state governments should offer assistance as well, at far greater levels than they currently do. While the West Coast and Chicago programs are laudable, only about 24,000 students — out of more than 50 million American schoolchildren — participate in them, according to the Department of Education. In contrast, hundreds of millions of Chinese students are required to study English.

Studies have repeatedly shown that children's brains are ripe for language learning at an early age, but American schools are missing that opportunity: As of 1997, according to the most recent survey by the Center for Applied Linguistics, less than 15 percent of elementary-school students were studying a foreign language, compared to almost 52 percent of high-school students. And of course, many students are lost to attrition before they attain advanced competency in their language, so to establish the National Language Service Corps, or meet the goals of the program, we will need many thousands more young students enrolled in language classes.

We might look to the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth as a model for recruiting high-achieving language learners. The center identifies students of great promise in a wide range of subjects from grades two through seven. Although it does not offer immersion programs in foreign language, designing such a curriculum for those talented students could play an important role in increasing the country's linguistic competency.

The Bush administration has taken a bold first step in identifying one of the great challenges facing American politics and society in the 21st century: how to significantly increase Americans' foreign-language competency. Will it work? The answer depends on whether the country can plan and create the short-term and long-term structures necessary to bring about a cultural shift in Americans' view of learning languages, and on how deep the commitment to that change proves to be among the multiple sectors of American society.

Ronald D. Liebowitz is president of Middlebury College.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 52, Issue 29, Page B10

[Copyright](#) © 2006 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#)