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Jan. 16 [Reality Check](#)

Can We Learn the Hard Languages?

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

To: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings

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Re: University Presidents Summit on International Education

A week or so ago, at the [University Presidents Summit on International Education](#), you honored us with an event delivered with class and style uncommon in executive branch engagements with university presidents and chancellors. As I'm sure you noticed, [we enjoyed the attention](#), respected the intent, and appreciated your personal and effective participation, as well as your mobilization of key actors including the President and First Lady. As we all returned to our campuses to reflect on the messages, themes, and programs discussed, and you return to the critical business of government, a reality check on our conversation seems in order.

International education in all its many forms has been a major agenda item in American higher education forever, and over the most recent 30 years or so, colleges and universities have conducted a constant conversation about internationalizing the curriculum and improving the campuses' ability to bring the world home.

This agenda, which reappeared in many of the comments by the university and college presidents in attendance, is really not a federal obligation. The task of internationalizing or globalizing our campuses belongs to the institutions. If internationalizing is a major campus concern, like teaching chemistry, the campus will find a way to do it because it will be central to the campus's academic and student programs. If a campus requires federal money to support a major change to its curriculum or to rethink its purposes, the campus is not likely to be effective anyway. I would recommend that you thank us for such insights, and return to the main purpose of the summit: language skills.

Success in this proposed joint venture requires that both the federal government and the universities speak clearly and precisely about what you want and what we can do.

We in the universities and colleges have much experience in taking tightly focused government programs and diffusing their intent to flow money into activities more central to our interests. If you fund language and area studies, we will leverage the language effort to get more resources for area studies, literature studies and culture studies. These are good things, but they do not address the national need you articulated at the summit, learning language.

Further, we in the colleges and universities are expert at avoiding effective performance measurement. If the nation needs college educated graduates functionally literate in a number of less commonly taught languages, the only way to get this result is to fund programs that will test the graduates. If you want us to graduate students with a command of spoken and written Arabic, Urdu or Mandarin, you need to fund a program that delivers money to institutions that demonstrate the functional literacy of its graduates in these languages through standardized tests. Otherwise, we will train people for you who can read some things in some languages, have traveled and lived in the countries where some of these languages are spoken, but who may or may not have functional usable literacy.

We are good at redefining objectives. If the federal government wants to help create college graduates who have high quality skills related to living and working within other languages, it must fund specific programs in specific countries focused on the acquisition of testable specific language skills. If we go to India, and live primarily with English speaking communities, we will return with cultural awareness and many good stories to tell about our experiences, but we will not have acquired functional competency in a foreign language or culture. You must be specific about what you want, specific about how you will know when you get it, and specific about the test you will apply to validate the learning accomplished. This is difficult in cultural studies, but it is not at all hard in language acquisition.

If we struggle with clarity and effectiveness in our international objectives and programs, our counterparts in the federal government — especially the State Department, the Defense Department, and some of the intelligence agencies — send conflicting messages about the importance of language and area studies expertise. While we hear that in-depth knowledge of countries and languages is essential to the defense and prosperity of the nation, we also know that the State Department and the Defense establishment tend to rotate their employees from place to place, country to country, language region to language region, devaluing in the process true expertise in either language or culture.

We also know that the career track to high level assignments in both State and Defense place a premium on generalist experience and knowledge and little emphasis on high levels of expertise in any particular language or culture. We are also unsure whether language competency is of any particular advantage for positions within the Department of Education.

You could do some things to improve the incentives for students to think of language related skills as major assets for careers in State, Education or Defense. For example, you might institute a language competency premium for mid to high level employees in the executive branch, a bonus addition to salary for those capable of maintaining a high level of language competency throughout their careers (tested on a periodic basis). You might consider longer term assignments overseas or in region specific offices or agencies as premium assignments with enhancements to salary or other benefits that would demonstrate that the enthusiasm for functional language skills is highly valued, much in the same way combat duty and other difficult assignments carry a premium.

These comments speak to the task of making the skills associated with uncommonly taught languages valued in the real world that our students watch with clear-eyed intensity. They know that in the great American Midwest, for example, the daily need to know someone else's language is minimal. We can travel for days without needing to speak anything but English. We see corporations hire language experts and culture brokers from among the nationals of countries where they trade and work, not from among the language fluent American college graduates.

Students see that only a few individuals in high government positions speak another language fluently, and almost none speak uncommonly taught languages. They see no premium for acquiring and maintaining a competency in difficulty to learn languages, and so they leave the language skills to native speakers, language and literature experts, and some area studies specialists.

To achieve your goals, you will need to help us focus on testable language skills, incentives for careers that use functional language skills, and support for overseas experiences that produce high levels of language performance.

We had a wonderful time at your summit, and the two of you are to be congratulated for what you are doing to improve education in the K-12 arena, facilitate the visa process, and address the constant challenge of encouraging the exchange of scholars without compromising national security. We are grateful for the respect reflected in the quality of our treatment during the Summit, and we are all eager to work with you.

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Reality Check every two weeks.

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