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## Should Our Students Study Chinese?

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

As major participants and drivers in the process of globalization, Americans have a remarkable ambivalence about the rest of the world. We want to be engaged, loved, respected — and obeyed. We seek collaboration, but on our terms. We embrace the international difference that most closely resembles ourselves: English speaking, Western European, or Latin American. We speak glowingly of international travel and study abroad, but most of us seek out places that approximate our home environment.

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Our colleges and universities encourage study abroad, develop internationalization initiatives, and welcome international students, but American students and faculty flee from the serious study of languages other than English. We teach the literature of our international trading partners in translation because so few of our students can read anything of substance in someone else's language. And, as we usually do in American academic circles, we worry about all this a lot.

The Institute for International Education publishes statistics and reports through its [Open Doors](#) series that give us a picture of how we engage our global colleagues. The good news is that more and more students study and travel abroad than ever before, most students understand that their future requires an engagement with the greater world outside our borders, and just about every college and university has some kind of international commitment in its curriculum.

The bad news is that few students take foreign languages and few institutions require them to do so. Only literature, history, and other area-studies specialists show any interest in the deep understanding made possible through immersion in language, and the numbers of students in these majors does not appear to be rising. Although everyone recognizes that our national security and prosperity demand experts with full proficiency and cultural literacy in a wide range of thinly taught languages, we find neither the national funding nor the student interest in developing these skills.

Often, our leaders in business and industry tell us how important international expertise has become, but they frequently hire well educated native speakers to lead their overseas operations, and offer little or no premium to American managers who have particular language skills. Our students, observing the career paths of highly successful people, learn quickly that while the business world values international travel and living experience, it sees only modest benefit from in-depth understanding of a specific language or culture.

Indeed, specialists in language and culture often fear relegation to mid-level corporate niches while their

generalist colleagues move around the company in different jobs in different places, advancing quickly up the corporate ladder. Even our State Department, charged with the obligation of keeping the country tuned to our global relationships, rotates Foreign Service officers from post to post, producing globally aware individuals with great breadth and minimal cultural and linguistic depth.

NAFSA, an organization of international student and study abroad advisers, published a [Report of the Strategic Task Force on Education Abroad](#). As I read it, I am not sure what to make of it. It calls for us to increase study abroad opportunities and asserts that language proficiency matters, but it recognizes that most students want to go where people speak English or where the U.S. already has significant cultural and historical familiarity (Europe and Latin America).

It calls for more engagement but notes that most students want to participate in semester programs rather than yearlong programs. It celebrates a dramatic increase in the number of students seeking study abroad opportunities but finds the numbers too small to meet the need.

Here, as in other reports of similar nature on different topics, we have a worthy objective presented by people who have the right idea and a clear sense of what we should do. At the same time, we have universities and colleges that cannot drive their students to study a language to any degree of proficiency, who cannot enforce any form of required international curriculum, and who squirm uncomfortably as they argue that a semester of study abroad will produce globally competitive leaders.

Perhaps our students and their employers are telling us something we do not want to hear. Maybe language and culture are much less important for global success than the subject competence that adds value to a business or a product. Maybe they know that only those who make language and culture their major area of study can approximate the abilities and skills of an ordinary educated native speaker.

Maybe they recognize that the years of study needed to acquire foreign language fluency in America will yield much less future income than similar effort invested in accounting, finance, physics, computer science or legal studies.

It is not what we want to hear, we internationalists, we specialists in language and area studies, we culture vultures who live and breathe the dramatic variety of the world's people. It is not what we want to hear, but when our students' behavior overwhelmingly fails to match our beliefs, we probably should listen more carefully.

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