

Globalization, Internationalization and the Imperative of Language Skills

In an ever-more connected world, where economic, technical and social forces rapidly integrate people once separated by distance and circumstance, there grows a concomitant need in the U.S. for individuals with the broad knowledge capable of successfully bridging significant cultural and language gaps, both at home and abroad.

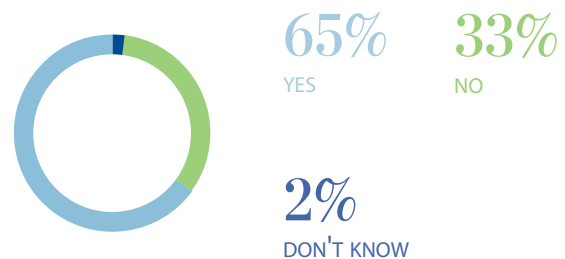
Indeed, the transition from an industrial-based society has brought on a new notion—and new imperative—in American business, that success flows from the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge.¹ In this new knowledge-based economy, the role of human capital has become more pivotal and more critical to the future growth and development of a company, community, region, or country. Increasingly, individuals are called upon to possess the skills and resources necessary to operate in a highly globalized, highly competitive economic environment.

As Jeff Standridge, vice president of global workforce management at Axiom Corporation remarked:

Our efforts are about more than just building up workforces in various geographies; we have to be able to work seamlessly across the enterprise, regardless of location...Without the ability to communicate clearly, concisely, and effectively in both directions, significant risks begin to enter the equation, including lower quality, lost productivity, and increased training costs. By addressing these needs early on, companies like ours can see a significant financial impact with global initiatives.²

Indeed, for companies today, with offices abroad and a diversified labor force at home, cross-cultural knowledge is at a premium—with multilingualism high on the list of competencies for potential employees. However, a 2011 survey of senior executives at U.S. companies showed that language barriers still affect organizations striving to compete and succeed on the global stage. Two in three executives surveyed (65 percent) said that, in managing diverse workforces, language barriers existed between their companies' managers and executives, and other workers—with significant impact. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (67 percent) said that miscommunications were leading to inefficiency. More than 40 percent noted

Figure 1. In managing a diverse workforce, would you say your company faces language barriers between executives/management and other workers?

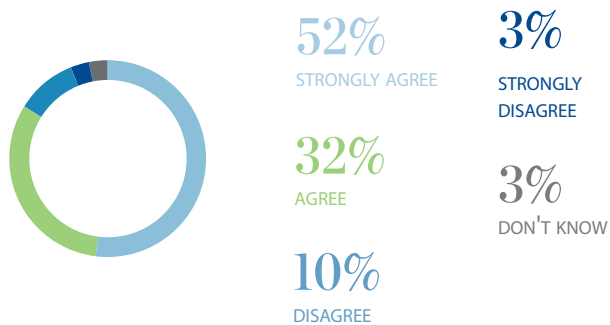


that miscommunication made collaboration difficult, and a similar percentage noted that productivity was lower than it should be due to language barriers.³

Figure 2. What do you believe are the most significant consequences of these language barriers?



Figure 3. Workers are more productive when managers or executives communicate with them in their native language



While lack of communication compromises productivity and management skills, the survey found that the reverse was also true, that communicating in a common language can increase productivity. More than 80 percent of respondents agreed that workers were more productive when their managers communicated with them in their native language.⁴

HIGHER EDUCATION RESPONDS

The forces of globalization, and the increasing demands of organizations for globally competent workers, have pressed upon universities the need to respond to the changing landscape—and, to some degree, they have, through the internationalization of educational programs. While global engagement has been occurring spontaneously for many years, through activities such as faculty and student exchanges, faculty-to-faculty research partnerships and formal or informal cooperation agreements, institutions today have begun to think more strategically about collaborations, as well as the construction and sequence of courses, and, above all, the roles each play in achieving successful institutional internationalization.

According to a recent survey conducted by the American Council on Education, U.S. colleges have become increasingly supportive of internationalized education. The report shows that, of the more than 1,000 colleges and universities included in the 2011 survey, there has been a significant increase in the number of colleges including international or global education in their mission statements, rising from less than 40 percent in a similar survey conducted in 2006 to more than 50 percent today. Half of all colleges surveyed reported internationalization among their top five strategic priorities.⁵

However, the survey also revealed that support for globally focused activities has simultaneously waned in certain areas—in particular, in the funding of faculty members to conduct research abroad or attend meetings or conferences overseas, and, perhaps more pointedly, a declining emphasis on foreign language instruction.⁶

According to the Modern Language Association, while the number of foreign language course-takers in higher education is up—college students nationwide enrolled in non-English language courses climbed to a record 1,682,627 in the fall of 2009, up 20 percent

from 2002—the proportion of all US students enrolled in foreign language courses rose only slightly during the period, from 8.1 percent to 8.6 percent. By contrast, in 1965, 16.5 percent of students were enrolled in a foreign language course. Many factors contribute to this decline, but it may be partially explained by the removal of foreign language requirements in degree programs.⁷

Another contributing factor to the decline is the tumultuous economy and accompanying budget cutbacks; in 2011 dozens of schools across the U.S., including the State University of New York at Albany, the University of Central Missouri, and the University of North Carolina system, eliminated a significant number of European-language majors.⁸

In this evolving environment colleges and universities have sought to meet the desires of organizations for multilingual employees by creating courses intended to develop not only skilled communicators, but also creative thinkers in intercultural environments. Despite recent budget cutbacks—or because of them—many institutions are leveraging new resources and constructing innovative programs to meet the demand for language skills, and in the process are changing the conditions under which language

learning takes place. Some of the innovative programs being developed by institutions include school specific initiatives, work/intern abroad, business partnerships and study abroad programs.

SCHOOL SPECIFIC INITIATIVES

Enhancing global perspectives has become an active pursuit across academic disciplines, as institutions seek to bring a global awareness to future professionals. At the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, for example, faculty and administrators are blending traditional classroom courses with flexible self-study programs to create an effective means for students to successfully navigate increasingly multicultural medical environments. *(See sidebar.)*

Additionally, within the U.S. legal profession, a growingly diverse population and a globalizing economy have put a new premium on cultural and language skills, not only in serving the needs of local clientele but in international transactions, where an understanding of foreign legal systems and cultures become a distinct advantage. Knowing only one language puts constraints not only on understanding but creative problem

University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine Prepares Culturally Competent Doctors

In 2008, the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine launched an innovative program called “Passport to Care,” intended to help medical students gain Spanish language skills, communicate with foreign-language patients not only in the Pittsburgh area, but carry those skills to patients in Miami, San Diego, New York City or wherever a graduate may establish a practice.

Under the program, students receive introductory lessons in Spanish targeted expressly at providing a competency in medical terminology, thereby facilitating doctor-patient interactions. Said John Mahoney, MD, associate dean for medical education at the school, “For medicine, the basic traveler skills are not sufficient. We needed medical Spanish. Doctors don’t want to know where the train station is, but what time did the baby’s fever begin, where the pain is, have you had your gall bladder out?”⁹ The school is under no illusion that a limited language instruction plan would replace the need for a highly skilled translator in serious cases, when an error in communication may prove consequential.

Students enroll in the 16-hour course as an elective, with in-class studies supplemented by a self-paced program licensed from Rosetta Stone. “For those who can’t fit classwork into their schedule, something like Rosetta Stone is an elegant solution,” Mahoney noted. “It’s not medically focused, but it is completely flexible.”

The University of Pittsburgh maintains a global medical system, with associated hospitals and research operations around the world. In particular, an increasing number of students travel to the system’s transplant facility in Palermo, Italy; before departing, the students often approach the school for lessons in Italian, to gain a basic competency. “We don’t have an Italian teacher on call, so we began using Rosetta Stone,” Mahoney said. “It’s asynchronous, so a student who is very busy and couldn’t come to class in the middle of the day can study at ten o’clock at night or on a Sunday afternoon. There’s a need and demand for students to be able to get language skills to succeed in their international endeavors, whether it is research or service.”

solving. “The disadvantage of monolingualism,” noted Vivian Grosswald Curran, professor in the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, “can be summarized as a limitation on the imagination.”¹⁰

Organizations of all types are realizing the usefulness of language skills within the legal profession:

*The consensus among lawyers, CEO’s, NGO activists, and others is that the people whom they would most like to hire are those who understand how to navigate between cultures. In a dream world, such competence would include knowledge of at least one foreign language.*¹¹

To build that competence, a growing number of institutions, including Georgetown University Law School, Columbia Law School, the University of Michigan Law School, the University of California, Berkeley School of Law, and the University of Miami School of Law, are developing courses in Spanish outside of traditional foreign language instruction—courses specifically relevant to the study of law. In 2009, Marquette University Law School inaugurated its “Comparative Criminal Law and Procedure in Spanish,” an open-enrollment course developed at the initiative of the school’s students.¹²

WORK AND INTERN ABROAD

Work abroad offers another effective means of achieving higher education’s responsibility to produce students prepared to contend with the new realities of the 21st century. Like study abroad, work and intern abroad programs are one component of an ongoing process to develop global competency through frequent interaction, meaningful exchanges, extended intercultural communication and up-to-date knowledge of current research and world events.

Among college-bound students, 35 percent plan an international internship. Likewise, 37 percent report a strong interest in acquiring career-related work experience in another country.¹³ In response, many institutions are creating cooperative programs with overseas organizations spanning a variety of professions, not just limited to business, economic development or government affairs, but science and technology as well.

At the University of Rhode Island College of Engineering, the need for advanced communication

skills is being addressed by the school’s innovative International Engineering Program, which uniquely combines language skills, study-abroad and work-abroad components. Jointly developed by faculty from the engineering and foreign language departments, the program was envisioned to be a five-year course of study, at the end of which graduates would earn two degrees, one in engineering and one in foreign language. The supplemental year was designed to give students the opportunity to study and work abroad. In the program, a semester would be spent in coursework at a participating university overseas, strengthening language skills and offering cultural immersion. The following six months would be spent in an internship at a selected company, allowing students to experience firsthand working at a foreign corporation. Despite the academic rigors of pursuing a dual degree, nearly a third of undergraduate engineering students enter the program, a rate far above the national average, illustrating the impact taking such a novel approach can have.¹⁴

BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

Said Kathryn Board, chief executive of the UK-based CILT National Centre for Languages, a non-profit, UK-based educational consultancy and service organization:

*What business needs is not always what the education system can—or indeed thinks it should—provide. There needs to be more dialogue between the education and business worlds to create the mutual understanding necessary to improve the match of supply and demand.*¹⁵

At Fox Valley Technical College, business needs indeed are changing the way that professors teach and students learn foreign languages in a variety of contexts. Located in a large employment cluster in Appleton, Wisconsin, the college, which enrolls about 50,000 students a year, serves the educational needs not only of individual students but a number of local companies seeking to enhance the skills of employees, to help them improve the management of a diverse workforce, as well as effectively conduct international business.

Organizations routinely call on the college with requests to provide courses on a range of topics, from cross-cultural training to modern languages. Need

assessments conducted by Fox Valley Technical College lead to customized programs, conducted either on site or on campus. In addition to traditional modern language courses in Spanish, Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic, French, German and Russian, among a host of others, the college offers specialized courses, such as Spanish for health care or law enforcement, or Chinese for business. “Knowledge of a foreign language is becoming more and more important,” noted Marie Martin, director of the college’s global education and services department. “It is a selling point on our students’ résumés when they apply for jobs.”¹⁸

Fluency is rarely achieved after one or two semesters, but students do become conversant, able to function in the language, and more culturally savvy. Such achievements are of particular importance to organizations looking to enhance workforce skills, to facilitate communication among functional teams, expand customer service, improve working relationships with overseas companies, or provide internal service to workers who travel. (See sidebar.)

To maintain a competitive edge, many US organizations have begun to require employees to participate in foreign language courses; 60 percent of companies surveyed by Forbes in 2011 reported such practices. Approximately the same percentage said their firms required training in intercultural management

practices (61 percent) or intercultural business practices (61 percent), while roughly two in three (68 percent) said that their firms required cultural awareness or competence training.¹⁷

STUDY ABROAD

Global engagement has been occurring spontaneously for many years, through activities such as study abroad programs—the successor to the 19th century idea of the “Grand Tour,” sending American students abroad for an immediate introduction to world cultures. Study abroad today still offers significant outcomes on international learning: intercultural competency, improved knowledge of world practices and “global-mindedness” have been included among its benefits to students. As well, international educators are discovering significant links between study abroad and retention and graduation rates. Research from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities reveals that 64.5 percent of students who study abroad graduate in four years, compared to 41 percent of students who do not participate in study abroad programs; at the five year mark the numbers increase to 90 percent for participants, and 58.6 percent for nonparticipants.¹⁸

Enhancing the Learning Experience at Fox Valley Technical College

Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton, Wisconsin, serves a diverse collection of students, both those preparing for a career and those already in the workforce. Of the latter, many are taking college courses at the behest of their employers, who are seeking to enhance their employees’ understanding of the world in which they work and, in the process, boost productivity through expanded knowledge.

Of particular interest to area businesses is cultural competency. Growing diversity within the organization and increasing globalization of the marketplace place a premium on employees able to navigate international waters.

Said Marie Martin, director of Fox Valley Technical College’s global education and services department, “Companies call on us with requests to provide courses on a range of topics, from cross-cultural training to modern languages.”¹⁹ Customized language instruction programs are created, matched to the organization’s goals and needs, with courses held either on site or on campus.

Foreign language classes generally meet once a week, but, according to Leah Caceras, head of the college’s department of Spanish, the school is “always looking to supplement class learning, searching for dynamic approaches. With language learning you need reinforcement every day.”²⁰ Unless students can connect with a Spanish speaker, for instance, the school turns to additional resources and technologies to aid students outside of class. Among those resources are Rosetta Stone online lessons. “It is an intuitive and interactive supplement,” said Caceras. “Of particular value is the studio session, giving students the ability to interact with native speakers so they can actually try out the language they are learning.” Appointments are made through the application and conversations are conducted online. Added Caceras: “Foreign language becomes less of a conceptual idea and more of a skill they can apply.”

Study abroad programs not only help solve colleges dilemma of creating globally competent graduates, but perhaps more importantly college-bound students want to participate in them. In recent research from the American Council on Education, conducted in conjunction with the College Board, 55 percent of high school respondents indicated they are certain or fairly certain they will participate in study abroad, with another 26 percent indicating a strong desire. Additionally, 70 percent of those students expressing a desire stated their intention of becoming proficient in a second language, or at least learning enough of the language to be able to “comfortably converse with people in that country.”²¹

Among those students indicating uncertainty about pursuing study abroad, 30 percent said that cost was a determining factor; interestingly, 26 percent cited their inability to speak a foreign language as a secondary reason. The economic concern may stem in part from the failure of institutions to adequately explain to prospective students the kinds of study abroad opportunities a school may offer, the relative costs of these options to campus-based education, and financial feasibility—despite increasing tuition rates at most institutions nationwide.

One means of enabling larger numbers of students to have some kind of international experience while containing costs is the short-term study abroad program, mounted in conjunction with partner institutions or satellite campuses, a growing option to traditional faculty-led tours. Indeed, such innovative semester-based programs have contributed to the tripling of students enrolled in study abroad programs over the past two decades, from fewer than 100,000 students per year in the 1980s to nearly 300,000 annually.²² Another way to enable a larger number of students to participate in study abroad is to make foreign language instruction an integral part of program preparation. Students thus prepare for an enhanced overseas learning experience by gaining a familiarity with the host language prior to embarking. Foreign language requirements in anticipation of study abroad cut across all disciplines and are pursued regardless of major. The requirement helps students overcome their second biggest obstacle to participation, to gain confidence, and ensures that students maximize their experience abroad.

Preparing Students for Study Abroad

At the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, students in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences are required to incorporate a “Global Education” component in their programs, whether pursuing a degree in economics, anthropology, political science, history or other related major. The intention is to expose students to the diverse cultural perspectives so essential to understanding the intricacies of modern society. Among the avenues of studies available in satisfying the Global Education requirement is a traditional foreign language option, with coursework rolled into the degree program. However, also available to students is a study abroad option, under which students can create individualized programs that include language preparation on campus in advance of taking courses abroad, thus giving students a broader knowledge base to draw on in their overseas encounters.

Language credits can be earned either through courses taught at the university or through the “Five College Supervised Independent Language Program.” The cooperative program, operated in conjunction with Amherst, Smith, Mount Holyoake and Hampshire colleges, offers students the opportunity to study languages not currently offered in classroom courses at any of the colleges, including such little-taught languages as Amharic, Bulgarian, Nepali, Pashto, Thai, Urdu and Vietnamese, among others.

Independent study, using a variety of textbooks, software and online resources, is supplemented by weekly conversation sessions, usually with native-speaking international students at one of the colleges. Some courses are mentored, which adds a weekly thirty-minute individual tutorial with weekly study guides and written homework assignments. Other programs include small group conversation sessions and one-on-one peer tutoring. Altogether, the courses prepare students in the major language skills—speaking, listening, reading and writing—and ultimately work to greatly enhance the study abroad program.

BENEFITING STUDENTS AND INSTITUTIONS ALIKE

Whether it is a cross-cultural building project, customer service initiative, scientific research or new product development, clarity in communications is imperative. Without the appropriate language skills, employers risk missed schedules, lower productivity, wasted materials and lost opportunities—all of which affect an organization's bottom line. In this new globalized economy, it is the responsibility of higher education to ensure its graduates have the necessary language and multicultural skills for success.

While higher education has responded to this new call to arms, as evidenced by the increased emphasis on international programs, many institutions still struggle to determine the best way to incorporate these skills into

their campus. The four innovative methods outlined—school specific initiatives, work/intern abroad, business partnerships and study abroad programs—enable colleges and universities to deploy a program quickly with little or any change to their existing infrastructure.

The benefits from preparing graduates for the global economy they will enter are far reaching, both for the students and the college. Students who participate in these programs are typically more engaged in their learning, leading to better retention rates and higher graduation rates for the college. But the biggest benefit comes in the form of employability. Students who graduate with language and multicultural skills are in high demand by organizations, resulting in a greater employability, higher salaries and increased mobility for these individuals.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Harris, 2001
- 2 Dugan, 2009
- 3 Forbes, 2011
- 4 Forbes, 2011
- 5 Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement, 2012
- 6 Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement, 2012
- 7 Furman, 2009
- 8 Glenn, 2011
- 9 Mahoney, 2012
- 10 Curran, 2005
- 11 Slaughter, 2004
- 12 Laplante, 2009
- 13 American Council on Education, 2008
- 14 Fischer, 2012
- 15 Forbes, 2012
- 16 Martin, 2012
- 17 Forbes, 2011
- 18 University of Minnesota Twin Cities, 2009
- 19 Martin, 2012
- 20 Caceras, 2012
- 21 American Council on Education, 2008
- 22 Institute of International Education, 2011

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