



Why Foreign Language?

As parents, students, teachers, and business and education leaders strive to ensure that today's students are well prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow, one question can and should be continually asked: What are the skills that every high school student needs to be successful in an increasingly competitive world, one where global challenges consistently cross national boundaries? Part of the answer to this question can be found within the State Scholars Core Course of Study,¹ which requires that students complete a rigorous high school education, including a minimum of two years of foreign language study – also called world language study.

There are three key reasons why foreign language is an essential component of a rigorous high school curriculum:

1. **Academic:** Research links foreign language study to higher performance on standardized tests and in college.
2. **Economic:** Foreign language skills are now, more than ever, essential for American workers, if they are to compete in the global marketplace.
3. **National security:** Foreign language skills have been identified by leaders at the highest levels of government as essential to U.S. national security.

Research Links Foreign Language with Higher Academic Performance

Foreign language course-taking exposes students to other cultures and broadens their awareness of the world around them. But did you know that researchers have also linked such learning to higher academic performance? Over the past several decades, studies have found that:

- Students who take foreign languages also achieve higher scores on the ACT in both reading and math.³
- Regardless of economic background, students who study a foreign language perform better on the verbal section of the SAT than those who don't; and the longer they study, the better they perform.⁴
- Among students of similar academic ability, there is a correlation between the study of foreign language in high school and higher academic performance in college.⁵

Foreign Language Acquisition Is Critical to U.S. Economic Competitiveness

Economists and policy experts agree that the global economic marketplace is rapidly becoming more interconnected and competitive as countries around the world continue to industrialize their economies and modernize their education systems. This means that an ever-increasing share of high-paying jobs will be tied to international markets. In fact:

- Experts now estimate that at least one in five U.S. jobs is already tied directly to international trade and project that the majority of future growth for U.S. industries of all sizes will be in overseas markets.⁶
- Some 40 percent of companies in a recent survey reported that their international sales were growing more rapidly than their domestic sales, and more than 60 percent expected this trend to increase over the next 10 years.⁷

“The U.S. market has been so large that Americans have assumed that the rest of the world would take the trouble to understand it and them. They have not had to reciprocate by learning foreign languages, cultures, or markets. ... Americans have delighted in this process because it makes it so much easier for them to travel and do business abroad. But it also gives the locals an understanding of and access to two markets and cultures. They can speak English but also Mandarin or Hindi or Portuguese. They can penetrate the U.S. market but also the internal Chinese, Indian, or Brazilian one. Americans, by contrast, have never developed the ability to move into other people's worlds.”²

– Fareed Zakaria
Editor, Newsweek International

How do foreign language skills fit in with this expanding economic globalization? Again, experts identify language acquisition as a critical need for American businesses and employees, if they are to remain competitive. In particular, to conduct negotiations and build strong relationships with foreign customers and executives, American business leaders and their employees need to be able to speak the language of their foreign associates.⁸

“To compete successfully in the global marketplace, U.S.-based multinationals as well as small businesses must market products to customers around the globe. Our firms increasingly need employees with knowledge of foreign languages and cultures.”

– *Committee for Economic Development, Education for Global Leadership, 2006*

Foreign Language Acquisition and U.S. National Security

Foreign language skills also play an increasingly vital role in ensuring U.S. national security. International challenges ranging from terrorism, disease epidemics, and environmental degradation directly threaten U.S. security interests and clearly underscore the need for students to increase their global knowledge and language skills. Government and national defense leaders have already recognized this critical need.

- To improve our national security, experts now recommend that foreign language education should be expanded at every level of the U.S. education system.⁹
- The U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense have issued urgent calls to develop higher levels of proficiency in a wider range of world languages.¹⁰
- Defense department leaders indicate that some 80 federal agencies already depend on staff proficiency in more than 100 foreign languages and that our military has a significant and growing demand for foreign language expertise.¹¹
- The U.S. Department of Education, through its SMART (Science and Math Access to Retain Talent) Grant for postsecondary education, provides funds to students who major in a foreign language that’s considered “critical to national security.”¹²

Meeting our nation’s demand for foreign language expertise will not be easy, but it is a goal that the State Scholars Initiative recognizes must be met. As one top defense department leader has noted, “The bottom line is that the core institutions of our country – defense, business, health care, law enforcement, etc. – will be competing with each other for language skills that are in short supply. For our long-term national well-being, the capacity must be increased to meet the demand of the 21st century.”¹³

Endnotes

¹ For more information on the SSI Core Course of Study requirements, visit www.wiche.edu/statescholars/about/core.aspx.

² Fareed Zakaria, “The Future of American Power: How America Can Survive the Rise of the Rest,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, accessed on 9/4/2008 at < <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080501facomment87303-p0/fareed-zakaria/the-future-of-american-power.html> > .

³ S.A. Olsen and L.K. Brown, “The Relation Between High School Study of Foreign Languages and ACT English and Mathematics Performance,” *ADFL Bulletin* 23, no. 3 (1992); E. Timpe, “The Effect of Foreign Language Study on ACT Scores,” *ADFL Bulletin* 11, no. 2 (1979), 10-11.

⁴ T.C. Cooper, “Foreign Language Study and SAT-Verbal Scores,” *Modern Language Journal* 71, no. 4 (1987), 381-387; P. A. Eddy, “The Effect of Foreign Language Study in High School on Verbal Ability as Measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Test-Verbal” (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1981).

⁵ P.D. Wiley, “High School Foreign Language Study and College Academic Performance,” *Classical Outlook* 62, no. 2 (1985), 33-36.

⁶ The Asia Society, “A Leadership Network of International Studies Schools,” accessed on 8/30/2008 from <<http://internationalstudieschools.org/about.htm>> .

⁷ Committee for Economic Development (CED), *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: CED, 2006). See also, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), *No Longer at Risk: A Nation in Peril*, (Boulder, CO: WICHE, 2008) at < <http://www.wiche.edu/statescholars/summit/proceedings.pdf> > .

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ States Institute report from the Second States Institute on International Education in the Schools (2003), accessed on 8/30/2008 from <www.internationalled.org/publications/SI03.pdf> .

¹¹ David S.C. Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, “Meeting the Need for World Languages,” remarks at the Third Annual States Institute on International Education in the Schools, 11/16/2004.

¹² U.S. Department of Education, “The National Science & Mathematics Access to Retain Talent Grant (National SMART Grant),” accessed on 9/23/08 from <<http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/SmartGrants.jsp>> .

¹³ Chu, “Meeting the Need for World Languages.”

September 2008

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SSI is administered by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), based in Boulder, CO, and funded by the U.S. Department of Education under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998. Currently funded at \$6.6 million, SSI is also supported with an in-kind contribution from WICHE. The work reported herein was supported under State Scholars Initiative, PR/Award Number (V051U050006), as administered by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Office of Vocational and Adult Education or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.