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Bush Proposes Broader Language Training

By [MICHAEL JANOFSKY](#)

Correction Appended

WASHINGTON, Jan. 5 - The Bush administration on Thursday proposed spending \$114 million on educational programs to expand the teaching of Arabic, Chinese, Farsi and other languages typically not taught in public schools.

Speaking to more than 100 college and university presidents attending a two-day conference at the State Department, President Bush said the effort would play a critical role in national security and lead to American students' gaining a better understanding of foreign cultures.

"In order to convince people we care about them, we've got to understand their culture and show them we care about their culture," Mr. Bush said. "You know, when somebody comes to me and speaks Texan, I know they appreciate the Texas culture. When somebody takes time to figure out how to speak Arabic, it means they're interested in somebody else's culture."

The administration invited the presidents to discuss issues that affect American college students studying abroad, the number of whom has steadily increased each year, and foreign students attending American universities, whose numbers declined over the last two academic years after nearly five decades of steady gains.

While the conference agenda calls for discussion of visa requirements and how to compete in a global economy, Mr. Bush focused on the need to produce more students capable of speaking foreign languages as a key component of national security.

"We need intelligence officers who, when somebody says something in Arabic or Farsi or Urdu, know what they're talking about," he said.

Robert Birgeneau, chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, said he was among presidents in Washington last year discussing similar issues with the Central Intelligence Agency. He said he left that meeting with the understanding that "their needs are desperate."

Mr. Birgeneau said that he appreciated the administration's efforts but that, for university presidents, language training for the government is "not our central focus."

Mr. Bush said the administration was "recalibrating the proper balance" between national security and the eagerness of universities to increase the number of foreign students, one of his few points that drew hearty applause.

Many school officials blame a tightening of restrictions after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, for driving away foreign students.

Nina Powell, the assistant secretary of state for education and cultural affairs, told reporters that the process had improved and that 97 percent of applicants now get visas "within a couple of days."

The administration's language proposal, known as the National Security Language Initiative, would create several new programs and build on others, including a Pentagon effort begun three years ago to increase the number of military personnel fluent in languages and familiar with customs in developing nations.

Barry Lowenkron, the assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, said a few of the programs might include a commitment to work for the government or the military. "But it's not like a draft," he said, adding: "We're not setting goals to have X number of people in Y years. The goal is to start building capacity."

He said that only 44 percent of American high school students were studying any foreign language and that 70 percent of those were learning Spanish. Ms. Powell said that by comparison, the nation had only 2,000 Chinese language grade-school teachers.

Margaret Spellings, the education secretary, said in an interview that efforts to teach such languages as Chinese and Arabic to children as young as 5 were brand new. "We don't know how to do it. This whole notion is in its infancy. But our hope is this is a start, and we can build on it."

Correction: Jan. 7, 2006, Saturday:

An article yesterday about a Bush administration proposal to expand the teaching of some foreign languages misstated the given name of the assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, who said the government had improved efficiency in issuing visas to foreign students. She is Dina Powell, not Nina.