

Foreign-Language Learning Promoted

Goal Is to Aid U.S. Security, Bush Says

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President Bush announced plans yesterday to boost foreign-language study in the United States, casting the initiative as a strategic move to better engage other nations in combating terrorism and promoting freedom and democracy.

"This program is a part of a strategic goal, and that is to protect this country," Bush said.

The plans, which represent an expansion of some programs and the start of a few others, aim to involve children in foreign-language courses as early as kindergarten while increasing opportunities for college and graduate school instruction. They also would draw more linguists into government service and establish a national corps of language reservists available to the Pentagon, State Department, intelligence community and other agencies in times of heightened need.

Much of the instruction is intended to focus not on the traditional European and Latin American languages that Americans have tended to study most, but on what the U.S. government has identified as languages "critical" for national security. These include Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi and Farsi, among others.

Bush intends to request \$114 million in fiscal 2007 for the programs, which involve the departments of State, Education and Defense, as well as the director of national intelligence, according to officials who briefed reporters on details.

The announcement came at a gathering of more than 120 U.S. university presidents at the State Department organized by the administration to focus attention on the challenges of international education.

The senior educators appeared to welcome Bush's initiative, with several calling it a positive first step toward addressing a serious shortage of linguists. But they also noted in interviews that the initial funding would be a tiny fraction of the amount needed to make a real impact.

A number of university leaders made clear as well that they are more interested in making it easier for foreign students to obtain visas to attend U.S. schools as a way of improving ties with and understanding of other countries.

Raising the visa issue himself, Bush said he wants to adjust visa policies to strike a better balance between security concerns and the entry of more students into the United States. He said he understands the "frustrations" of higher-education leaders with the visa restrictions the federal government imposed after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It's in our national interest that we solve visa issues," he said, drawing the first of two rounds of applause. "We're going to get it right, because the more youngsters who come to America to get educated, the more likely it is people in the world will understand the true nature of America."

Although Americans as a nation have been notoriously averse to learning foreign languages, the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and the broader fight against terrorism have made the issue a major national security

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concern for administration officials.

The U.S. government has found itself critically short of troops, diplomats and intelligence analysts skilled in the languages of the places where much of the battle is taking place. Further, widespread perceptions of America as culturally insensitive have contributed to the precipitous decline in the U.S. image abroad.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, introducing Bush yesterday, said the United States should give as much attention to the study of Arabic and other critical languages as it did to Russian and Eastern European culture during the Cold War.

"We have not, as a country, made the kind of intellectual investment that we need to make in the exchange of people, in the exchange of ideas, in languages and in cultures and our knowledge of them that we made in the Cold War," said Rice, who holds a doctorate in international studies and was a specialist in Soviet affairs.

Bush portrayed the enhancement of foreign-language skills as a way of enlarging U.S. capacity to spread democracy. "You can't convince people unless you can talk to them," he said.

He described learning somebody else's language as a "kind gesture" showing care for another culture. It would be a way to combat the notion that the United States is bullying in imposing its concept of freedom, he said.

"When Americans learn to speak a language, learn to speak Arabic, those in the Arabic region will say, 'Gosh, America's interested in us. They care enough to learn how we speak,'" Bush said.

Some of the programs outlined yesterday appeared to carry specific targets, according to a State Department fact sheet. The National Flagship Language Initiative, for instance, hopes for 2,000 advanced speakers by 2009. The Pentagon-sponsored Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps is aiming for 1,000 volunteers in several years.

But in a State Department briefing, officials sought to emphasize general growth rather than individual targets.

"We're not setting the goals in terms of X number of individuals by Y number of years," said Barry F. Lowenkron, the assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor. "Our goal is to start building capacity."

He also defended the size of the proposed initial investment but indicated it is meant only to get things started, noting that some foundations and private businesses have expressed interest in contributing additional funds.

"We view this as serious seed money to get this thing launched," he said.

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