

Pursuit of world languages and cultures provides vital training for life and work in the Twenty-first Century. In advance of the September 24-25 G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, this essay appeared in a report produced by Carnegie Mellon University and the Atlantic Council entitled "Renewing Globalization and Economic Growth in a Post-Crisis World: The Future of the G20 Agenda" (<http://www.cmu.edu/g20/ac-report.html>).

**ARE WE EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION  
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?  
THE PROMISING PURSUIT OF WORLD LANGUAGES AND CULTURES**

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Advocates for education in the humanities or liberal arts maintain that these disciplines are prerequisites for personal growth and participation in a pluralistic democracy, regardless of a student's career choice. Yet many share the perspective expressed in a *New York Times* article of February 24, 2009, that carried the banner "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth." Author Patricia Cohen wrote, "In this new era of lengthening unemployment lines and shrinking university endowments, questions about the importance of the humanities in a complex and technologically demanding world have taken on new urgency." In this same vein, Cohen quoted Richard Freeland, the Massachusetts commissioner of higher education, who asserted that study of the humanities evolved during the twentieth century "to focus almost entirely on personal intellectual development and that much attention has not been paid to how students can put those abilities effectively to use in the world, [and] that we have created a disjunction between the liberal arts and sciences and our role as citizens and professionals."

When I addressed our Modern Languages graduates at Carnegie Mellon University this past May, my message was that they present a promising response to those who voice concerns about the value of the humanities. Having acquired vital training for global citizenship in the twenty-first century, these graduates are especially well prepared to communicate, work, and network in our increasingly interconnected world. How so? Here are five significant and promising indicators.

First, these students have gained strong linguistic and analytic skills. Systematically and incrementally, they have built impressive multilingual-communication and critical-thinking skills enabling them to read, write, listen, speak, and explore in languages in addition to English. English may be considered the lingua franca in much of the working world. Yet current research, published in 2009 by the International Research Foundation for English Language Education and aimed at capturing the role of English and plurilingualism in hiring, training, job advancement, and other human resource and talent development practices of global corporations, has shown that corporations are engaged in efforts to define and assess their language needs. Global corporations prefer to set high language-proficiency thresholds but find that the supply of qualified candidates is limited. The global corporate world is recognizing the

importance of language proficiency and its economic returns, and these returns are identifiable beyond the corporate world in multilingual and multicultural contexts in the fields of technology, law, health care, education, the arts, and more.

A second indicator is the perseverance of these students. They have developed their linguistic and cultural proficiency through hard work, much practice, and persistence. They have also learned by way of some healthy and constructive embarrassment from their mistakes, some of which are fairly humorous. We all have stories about language blunders. Among my favorites is the Spanish student who described the North Pole, the home of Santa Claus, as the *norte polaco* (the north Polish person). Another student, while ordering dinner, mixed up *pecho* (human breast) and *pechuga* (chicken breast). Strong determination seasoned with a healthy sense of humor in the face of challenges makes for a beneficial balance of confidence and humility.

A third signal is the spirit of cooperation and community that these students possess. They have engaged in collaborative learning through projects and presentations in diversely populated modern-language classes and groups with students from across the colleges of the university and from all over the world. An example is the student majoring in Japanese who completed her senior thesis entitled “Enhancing Japanese Kanga Acquisition in Non-Native Readers.” Taking inspiration from her own experience, she collaborated with other undergraduates and graduate students to develop a computerized program to help students learn Japanese characters through strategies of association rather than straight memorization. Another example is the Hispanic Studies student who, for her senior thesis project, told the story of Pittsburgh’s growing number of Spanish-speaking immigrants who remain largely unseen by the city’s traditionally non-Hispanic population. In a service-learning course, this student and her classmates connected with Spanish-speaking members of the local area to uncover their history, issues, and perspectives.

A fourth sign of the advantageous position of these students as global citizens is their appreciation of self and others. They have gained important cross-cultural awareness, learning much about themselves in the process of learning about the practices and perspectives of others. Many of them, through study abroad and immersion in other cultures, have gained critical insights into the strengths and limitations of their own cultures and values as they have experienced life in new contexts. Many have also developed a heightened appreciation for the unity and diversity of the cultures and peoples of our interconnected world. They have embraced the important lesson in Dr. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s essay “The Case for Contamination” that “we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in other civilizations, their arguments, their errors, and their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement but because it will help us get used to one another—something we have a powerful need to do in this globalized era.”

A fifth indicator is the great creative and interdisciplinary strength exhibited by these students. Creatively combining their study of languages and cultures with many other fields, these students appreciate the added value of their language study to their

next step, be it graduate school or work in business, technology, the social sciences, international relations, the health and service professions, or other areas. These students have integrated their study of world languages and cultures with additional disciplines, such as Chinese with architecture, biological sciences, biomedical engineering, economics, information systems, or international relations; French with art, biological sciences, mechanical engineering, or psychology; German with chemistry, computer science, material science, or music; Hispanic Studies with electrical and computer engineering, history, math, professional writing, Social and Decision Sciences, or urban design; Japanese with information systems, architecture, or electrical and computer engineering; and Russian with linguistics or psychology. These undergraduates provide strong counterevidence to the concern that there is a disjunction between study of the humanities and our role as citizens and professionals.

Unfortunately, the fact that these students have achieved a high level of proficiency in an additional language or languages, or, for that matter, have studied an additional language at all, sets them apart from the vast majority of university students in the United States. According to an enrollment survey published by the Modern Language Association in 2007, only 8.6 percent of college students had studied an additional language during their undergraduate years. We must appeal to students who have attained advanced-level skills in additional languages to hold themselves up as role models. Whatever professional paths or personal journeys they take, we look to them to be active multilingual messengers, future leaders, and inspirations to others. They are well poised to build bridges of comprehension, tolerance, and appreciation of our similarities and differences in this twenty-first-century world. There should be no doubt that their humanities training and the fruits of their dedicated study of world languages and cultures contribute to enhanced prospects for themselves and enriched fields of exchange and knowledge transfer for those with whom they interact.

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