

Government Needs and Shortages in Foreign Language and Regional Expertise and Knowledge

Signals, Facts, and Clues

At the last conference convened on behalf of the Coalition for International Education in 2003, Dr. Nancy Ruther addressed the issue of “The international and Foreign Language Human Capital Challenge of the U.S. Federal Government.” Just prior to the conference the General Accountability Office issued its report entitled, “Foreign Languages -- Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls.” This paper begins with a brief summary of the findings of those two publications as a starting point.

In the decade that has since passed, one would hope that the need for foreign language and regional expertise would have become clearer, more quantifiable, and established as a human resource baseline for the purpose of recruiting and developing that expertise in our government. Indeed, as this paper will show, there was much activity around this issue and the foreign language issue overall in those ensuing years. This paper traces the various activities, hearings, assessments and reviews taking place since 2003.

In general, as my subtitle hints, there have been strong *signals* from major players in the Administration and the Congress that the need for foreign language and regional expertise and knowledge is critical. It is more difficult to pin down *facts*. Some data on the number of such jobs in the federal sector does exist. However, that data fails to answer the question of how many of those jobs there should be. *Clues* are more interesting to contemplate. There are requirements for federal agencies to provide service to those with Limited English Proficiency.

In addition, a program allows agencies to reach out for assistance on an as needed basis. These clues indicate some examples of how the Government employs language and regional expertise.

Signals

In early 2004, the Department of Defense (DoD) embarked on a major initiative to change fundamentally the way foreign language was valued and used in the military. In February of 2005, DoD published its Defense Language Transformation Roadmap to this end.

To meet its historic language needs, DoD runs its own language school, the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, where it trains its own linguists to address part of the need. However, as its forces were engaged in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, DoD realized that it had a greater need for language and regional expertise capability.

The lessons of the conflicts, threats of terrorism and increasing globalization led DoD to understand that the need for language and regional expertise capabilities would grow. DoD sought to invigorate language study and an understanding of the importance of language study in the nation to address this need. The rationale was clear – if the Department needed members with foreign language capability, its training job would be simplified if those entering the military already had studied a foreign language. Therefore, in June of 2004, the Department of Defense (DoD) in collaboration with the Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) convened the National Language Conference. This conference pulled together a vast audience representing language organizations, academia, federal and state governments, and industry to discuss the need for foreign language in the United States and actions that could be taken in all sectors to address this need. The findings of the National Language Conference were published as a White Paper, and included recommendations for the federal government, and an overarching

recommendation for an interagency council to coordinate language efforts across the federal government.

In 2005, the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense joined in an effort to improve foreign language capability in the nation. The effort was expanded to include the Director of National Intelligence. After months of senior level planning, the final product was announced to the nation as the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) by President George W. Bush in January 2006. Each agency had designated responsibilities. The goals, in general, were designed to increase the study of “critical need” languages in the United States. The overarching emphasis was to build a base of citizens who had foreign language ability, from whom the federal government could recruit employees to fill critical needs.

Also in 2005, Senator Daniel Akaka, (as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia) introduced the National Foreign Language Coordination Act of 2005. This Act was intended to adopt legislatively the recommendation of the National Language Conference for an Interagency Coordinating Council. In 2007, his Subcommittee began a series of hearings on the need for foreign language capability.

In November 2008, the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations completed an investigation of the DoD language program. Among other findings, their report highlighted that DoD’s efforts were tied to a larger nationwide effort.

Most recently, the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language hosted a gathering of foreign language interests in a “Languages for All” gathering and issued a

subsequent White Paper emphasizing the need to allow everyone the chance to study languages and the resources available to make that happen.

Consensus from experts in the field (expressed through the National Language Conference), leaders in the Administration (including the President), and members of Congress surely sent the signal that foreign language, and by extension regional expertise, were critical skills to be addressed by federal agencies.

Facts

Public efforts to determine need, numbers, and shortages focused on national security agencies. Senator Akaka's hearings beginning in 2007 called agencies such as the Department of Defense, The Director of National Intelligence, the Department of State, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Homeland Security to testify. This paper describes those hearings and the testimony received from Agency witnesses. Where possible, numerical accounting for capability and need is drawn from those hearings.

Other sources also provide numerical evidence of numbers of foreign language experts. For example, can also get a hint of federal needs by examining the jobs filled by National Security Education Program graduates. The National Security Education Program, through its Boren scholarships and fellowships, requires its graduates to provide national service. This routinely results in graduates working for the federal government in a variety of positions. These positions are used as another way to identify needs.

Clues

Federal agencies hire or contract for a set of language skills to meet needs that can be anticipated and that are an identified part of the mission. Agencies such as the Department of State can identify the Foreign Service Officers who need to be placed in Language Designated

Positions, requiring a high level of proficiency in both language and regional expertise. But Federal agencies also have a surge requirement, seen in the call for language help in reaching heritage communities after Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The clues to these federal agency requirements can be found in three sources.

A first source is found in the annual report compiled by the Secretary of Education in response to a requirement of the Higher Education Act, detailing the languages identified as important by the interagency. The list of languages identified as important by federal agencies is quite exhaustive and represents broad federal government deliberation as to the locations and languages of the world seen as important. The second is in the government response to the requirement to respond to those with Limited English Proficiency. Established by Executive Order 13166 in 2000, Agencies are to identify how they intend to serve those who cannot speak English. And the third is with federal agency use of the National Language Service Corps, an outgrowth of the NSLI. The National Language Service Corps is an on-call group of Americans with language skills who are willing to deploy in times of need to assist any federal agency with immediate foreign language requirements.

Thus, the answer to the question implied in the title of this presentation is more complicated than a simple numerical counting of numbers of positions and fill rates. This paper attempts to weave together the Signals, Facts, and Clues into a comprehensive picture of government needs and strategies.