

Middle East education gets support in D.C.

Higher education promotes language study at hearing

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Representatives from UT, Brigham Young University and Ohio State University testified Tuesday about the progress of the nation's foreign language education.

UT Vice Provost Terri Givens was one of the four congressional witnesses to speak at the hearing of the the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the House Armed Services Committee, which emphasized the need for education in Middle Eastern languages. Givens discussed the unique features of UT's flagship programs in Middle Eastern languages and the University's effort to educate future K-12 teachers in similar languages.

"[UT] has the only Hindi Urdu flagship and one of the largest Arabic language faculty," she said.

Givens recognized UT's concentration on language instruction but told the committee that funding to develop and continue language programs is critical to retaining experienced faculty to teach higher level language courses and formulating a comprehensive curriculum.

"We've been a leader in language education for a long time," Givens said. "There is also a need for more funding. Look at the way funding has impacted our ability to train students: It's one thing to teach Arabic, but you have to be teaching it at a higher level to have the abilities [students] need to move up, and that revolves around faculty."

UT houses two flagship programs in Middle Eastern languages. In the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, the Arabic Flagship Program allows undergraduates who excel in two semesters of Arabic to enroll in specialized courses to develop their fluency of the language and knowledge of the culture, earn a degree in the major of their choice and participate in a capstone trip to Egypt the year following graduation.

The Hindi Urdu Flagship serves the same purpose for the Hindi and Urdu languages, which share common grammar rules and vocabulary. Students in the Hindi Urdu Fellowship usually travel to India during their third year of the four-year program.

These programs serve to produce graduates with superior Arabic language abilities to become global citizens, said Mahmoud al-Batal, director of the Arabic Flagship Program.

"As citizens of this global village, we have to be able to relate to [other people's] languages and cultures," he said. "For Americans to be able to communicate, to interact, to be a world leader, we need to be able to communicate in [other people's] own language. We want to prepare American undergraduates to partake in activities, dialogue, to present the values of American society."

Universities have served as the breeding ground for the effort to educate Americans about Middle Eastern languages and cultures. This effort is a throwback to an increase in Russian language instruction that occurred during the Cold War.

A survey released last year by the Modern Language Association and funded by the U.S. Department of Education found

the popularity of students in American universities studying Arabic rose 127 percent from 2002 to 2006, making it the 10th most studied language.

Robert Slater, director of the National Security Education Program, a project administered by the U.S. Department of Defense — which funds UT's programs — said multi-language instruction should occur as early as possible in a student's education.

"The appropriate venue for learning languages is during a student's education from early schooling through university," he said. "The U.S. needs to focus on building this skill into a student's curriculum from the time they begin elementary school."

Slater cites a report by the 9/11 Commission — an independent and bipartisan group created to investigate the cause of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — as proof that developing Americans' fluency in Middle Eastern languages is essential to the nation's interests.

"The need for Americans with expertise in languages has been clearly established as critical to U.S. national security," he said. "The ability to communicate more effectively in other languages is a critical skill. It's important in virtually every aspect of U.S. national security, foreign affairs and diplomacy."

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