**Why We Need Fulbrights**

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Congressional budget cuts to vital cultural-understanding programs are making America less competitive and less secure, say Cornell University’s Glenn C. Altschuler and David J. Skorton. Their argument, below.

One of the key lessons of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 was that many U.S. politicians, diplomats and intelligence officers were flying blind due to a lack of understanding of the Islamic religion and relevant cultures in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Recognizing this unmet need for better understanding of outside cultures, Congress increased support for two federal programs, Title VI and Fulbright-Hays, which enable American universities to immerse students in the cultures and languages of friends and foes around the world.
As we prepare to observe the tenth anniversary of 9/11 — and as the challenges of a global economy intensify — it’s hard to argue that the need for Title VI/Fulbright-Hays programs has disappeared. As the National Academies cautioned in 2007, "A pervasive lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and foreign languages in this country threatens the security of the United States as well as its ability to compete in the global marketplace."

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Apparently, our elected officials aren't on the same page. Last spring Congress passed a continuing resolution that cripples programs crucial to our prosperity and national security. In the current budget for this year, Title VI-funded National Resource Centers nationwide are facing more than $18 million in cuts — almost half their budget — while Fulbright-Hays grants have been eliminated entirely. These programs are essential to our ability to understand events such as the Arab Spring, China’s emergence as a global economic force, and the war in Afghanistan.

Title VI was introduced in 1958 as part of the National Defense Education Act to ensure a steady supply of graduates with expertise in languages that aren’t commonly taught and areas of the world where those languages are spoken. Title VI provides that training domestically, while Fulbright-Hays support students as they develop their skills overseas.

Spending on Title VI and Fulbright-Hays programs accounts for less than two-tenths of 1% of the federal Department of Education budget. These cuts will have little impact on the federal deficit, but they will turn back the clock on intelligence gathering and hamstring American efforts to keep pace with the daily, almost hourly, changes in strategically important countries.

We support efforts to address the federal deficit — and recognize that private industry, the public sector and academia all have a role to play in reducing costs and increasing efficiency. Following the economic crisis of 2008–2009, which hit our university (Cornell) hard, we shrunk the administration and made painful decisions, including layoffs. But we learned to identify programs that are so important to our core mission that they must be spared from cuts or even provided additional funding. We submit that, on the federal level, Title VI and Fulbright-Hays make up one of those important areas.

The U.S. Army Foreign Area Office Program is one of several government agencies that have sent staff to Title VI centers for Masters degrees in language and area studies.

Title VI programs prepare American managers to compete in the global marketplace. And Title VI provides expertise to enable small and mid-sized businesses to increase exports, supporting job creation and reductions in our nation’s trade deficit.

More than half of the graduate students who study less-commonly taught languages (such as Hindi, Indonesian and Farsi) and 78% of those who study the least-common languages such as Pashto and Urdu do so at Title VI-funded National Resource Centers.

Among those who have benefited from Title VI and/or Fulbright programs are several recently retired leaders: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates; John Abizaid, head of Central Command in Iraq; and...
Aaron David Miller, a State Department official and adviser to six Secretaries of State.

The complexities and competing interests involved when massive budget cuts need to be made are daunting, and as citizens we tend not to pay enough attention to cuts that don’t touch us directly. But this matter is quite simple. If Title VI and Fulbright-Hays are allowed to wither for lack of funding, there will be fewer culturally and linguistically fluent graduates to staff our intelligence community, our businesses and our government. As a nation, we will be less well informed, less secure and less competitive — vindicating the fears of those who suspect that America’s best days are behind her, and thwarting the efforts of those who believe the best is yet to come.

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