



THE LANGUAGE FLAGSHIP

Creating Global Professionals

FLAGSHIP CENTERS UNVEIL LANGUAGE ROADMAPS

To compete in a global economy and to respond to the demands of its increasingly diverse population, America must promote and support the study of foreign languages and cultures. Such is the overwhelming consensus of three “roadmaps to language excellence,” the results of a Flagship initiative conducted to address growing language and cultural deficiencies in regional, state, and local U.S. workforces.

Flagship Centers at Ohio State University; the University of Oregon; and the University of Texas, Austin, led the language roadmap effort. The National Security Education Program oversaw the initiative, which was funded by the U.S. Congress and cosponsored by the U.S. Department of Commerce and the U.S. Department of Labor. The six-month project included the June 2007 Language Summits held at these three Flagship Centers and culminated in October 2007 with the publication of a language roadmap — a strategic plan for language education — for each participating state.

Participants in the language roadmap initiative recognize the importance of articulating the demand for foreign language skills within broad private as well as public contexts. “To increase language capability in the federal government, we have to assume a more proactive role in promoting language education in the American population,” says David Chu, undersecretary for personnel and readiness at the U.S. Department of Defense. “We recognize that the need for language capacity in the United States goes well beyond the needs of the national security community.” This Flagship effort helps define the roles of governments (federal and state) and educational communities (K–12 teachers, higher education teachers, administrators, and parents) and underlines the great need to engage business as part of the strategic response to the demand for language skills.

A successful workforce for the 21st century must have a strong knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, as some of the largest, most successful U.S. companies already recognize. “Microsoft does business in more than 160 countries,” explains Erick Watson, lead project manager at Microsoft Corporation. “So, it’s really imperative for us that we have a highly educated and culturally fluent workforce.” He adds, “We wouldn’t be able to be half the success we are today without that.” Mari McBurney, a leadership development director at Nike Corporation, agrees. “Some of Nike’s fastest growth is occurring in the Americas and the Asia Pacific region,” she says. “The ability of our employees to speak to our customers and to our employees in [the Asia Pacific] region is absolutely critical.”

OBJECTIVE AND APPROACH

“The roadmap initiative gave those of us who teach languages a chance to learn how our work impacts society by creating a dialogue on foreign language with business and government,” says Galal Walker, director of the Chinese Flagship Program at Ohio State University. Each language summit was intended to identify and quantify the foreign language requirements of its host state by bringing together the business, government, and educational communities. Government and business represented the demand (or problem) side, and K–12 educators, state boards of education, and universities

represented the supply (or solution) side. In an active “think tank” environment, participants discussed the factors that drive demand for language and cultural skills — currently and over the coming decades — and those that prevent the state from supplying foreign language and cultural education. “We learned much about how people in the work-a-day world cope with language issues and how they think things can be made better,” Walker reports.

“It’s a different way of thinking about educational reform and a different way of thinking about language education,” says Carl Falsgraf, director of the Chinese Flagship Program at the University of Oregon. Globalization, immigration, and the events of September 11, 2001, have created an environment in which the United States is “now looking seriously at languages and cultures as something that is essential instead of a thrill,” he adds. A series of working groups composed of representatives from business, state and local government, and the educational community convened after each summit. The challenge to these working groups was to develop a strategic plan for meeting the demand for language education, and the solutions were intended to reflect the economic, political, and social realities of each state.

The final product of each summit (and subsequent working groups) is that state’s language roadmap for the 21st century. Each roadmap provides strategically developed proposals to help implement short- and long-term approaches to foreign language and cultural education in that state’s system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Each language roadmap establishes a unique set of state-specific goals and timelines for meeting those goals. “They reflect the realities of the demographics of each state. Their efforts and recommendations are path-breaking,” says Chu. He adds that the roadmaps “systematically define the demands for language skills in the workplace — both state and local government[s] and businesses,” and that the roadmaps “propose recommendations that are feasible and cost-effective.”

The three reports share five general recommendations that may be applicable to other states.

1. Make language a matter of public policy.

The initiative brought language education to the public policy debate by asking state policy-makers and business leaders to examine their needs and priorities for foreign language skills and then identify how to create a workforce with these skills. The participation of state and local government decision-makers as well as the business community is necessary to move the language agenda forward. Flagship Centers will continue to explore ways to address the key components of these roadmaps and to provide opportunities for more states to develop their own language roadmaps.

2. Establish advocacy and coordination for language education at the state level. One office or organization should be given primary responsibility for the language agenda.

- The Ohio Language Roadmap for the 21st Century proposes creating a center that resides within an appropriate government agency or an institution of higher education or that operates as an independent nonprofit organization.
- The Oregon Language Roadmap for the 21st Century suggests establishing an office that would help the Oregon Department of Education provide leadership to

- expand dual-language educational programs and international exchanges, guidance for proficiency development and assessment (as well as state proficiency goals), and support for language teacher licensures.
- The Texas Language Roadmap for the 21st Century acknowledges that a high-level coordinating board must be legally mandated to establish benchmarks and assess the state's performance in reaching core objectives.

3. Train and certify a qualified teaching force.

The lack of qualified, certified teachers and instructors severely limits the expansion of language education. More accelerated teacher training programs are required to support the critical languages that are in high demand. General recommendations include

- Coordinating teacher incentive programs to provide scholarships for language proficient students to pursue teaching careers,
- Encouraging bilingual individuals seeking certification in other content areas to help staff the dual-language and immersion programs, and
- Recruiting college-educated heritage speakers to become licensed teachers.

4. Improve public awareness about language learning and academic performance.

Over the past decade, several developments have thwarted the implementation of language programs in elementary, middle, and high schools. Even while successful companies strive to create local workforces with global perspectives in an increasingly global economy, evidence indicates an entrenched bias toward the English language and a pervasive idea that English is the only language needed for business. Outreach strategies must be developed and implemented to ensure the future success of language education initiatives.

5. Start language learning early.

By learning languages early and making language learning a life-long endeavor, Americans can achieve professional language proficiency.

- Noting that 67% of Ohioans believe that language programs should begin in the early elementary grades, the Ohio Language Roadmap proposes focusing on not only longer sequences of learning but also the integration of language education into content education.
- The Oregon Language Roadmap suggests developing a reward system for demonstrated language proficiency. It would reward students and educational institutions that succeed rather than punish those that fail, thereby creating an environment that encourages rather than mandates reform.
- The Texas Language Roadmap advocates an Early Start Initiative. In partnership, the school districts, higher education institutions, parents, businesses, and local communities would establish prekindergarten programs according to established models for early language learning.

APPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The roadmaps to language excellence are sources of important ideas and strategies, and not only for Ohio, Oregon, and Texas. "We have some revolutionary ideas for making things happen in Oregon that will give us a sustained competitive advantage — that will make Oregon the kind of place where people coming from overseas will feel comfortable, a place where every Oregonian can be part of the culture here," says Falsgraf. These strategies may be extrapolated and adapted to other systems, state and federal.

In Ohio, a transitioning economy motivates changing the current approach to foreign language teaching. “Getting citizens and officials to focus on language issues provides us an opportunity to expand the vision of the future of the state,” says Walker. “It is time that Ohioans consider their role in the global economy. Actually, it’s past time.” In the bigger picture, The Language Flagship is “exactly what the country needs to integrate ourselves in the global economy and to guarantee for ourselves a future of peace, security, and prosperity as one of the nations of a global world,” says Chu. The initiative is already having an effect; Utah, for example, is taking steps to develop its own language roadmap. Flagship Centers will remain integral components of this initiative and will continue to seek ways to expand innovative approaches and best practices to foreign language programs throughout the United States.

To learn more, download the Ohio, Oregon, and Texas language roadmaps from the Flagship Web site at <http://www.thelanguageflagship.org/roadmaps.html>.