

Arabic Is Blooming

For strategic, business, and cultural reasons, Arabic programs have grown rapidly at U.S. institutions—even surpassing some traditional favorites.

BY VICKI VALOSIK

LUKE HOLZAPFEL, A EUROPEAN HISTORY MAJOR in his senior year at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), planned to take Portuguese in college, but when his language of choice was full, he snagged one of the last seats in introductory Arabic instead. Now he is happy for the way things worked out.

“The ability to speak Arabic is an increasingly important skill,” says Holzapfel. “The Middle East is a burgeoning area for a wide variety of fields.” Although he says employment in the intelligence community is the “white whale” among many Arabic students, he regularly hears of job opportunities at the State Department and with private companies as well. “And, given the growing number of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa,” he adds, “Arabic language skills are increasingly critical in humanitarian efforts.” Holzapfel, who is now a senior, has added a minor in Middle East studies and says he “couldn’t be more thankful” that the Portuguese class was full.

U.S. undergraduate students are enrolling in Arabic courses in record numbers. According to the Modern Language Association (MLA), which conducts foreign language enrollment surveys at the national level, Arabic is by far the fastest-growing language at U.S. colleges and universities. After the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001, Arabic moved for the first time into the top 10 list of foreign languages studied in the United States, growing at a rate of 126.5 percent between 2002 and 2006. By 2009 Arabic enrollment had grown another 46.3 percent, far outpacing the second and third fastest-growing languages, Korean and

Chinese, which were up 19.1 percent and 18.2 percent, respectively. As of the most recent MLA survey, which was published in 2010, Arabic was the eighth most-studied language in U.S. colleges and universities, with approximately 35,083 course enrollments nationwide.



An exercise to learn Arabic.

Arabic Becoming More Popular Than Some Longtime Foreign Language Favorites

At some universities, such as California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), Arabic enrollment is surpassing traditional languages.

“The balance has really shifted,” says Dany Doueiri, coordinator of the Arabic Language Program at CSUSB, explaining that in 2013, CSUSB graduated more Arabic majors than French majors for the second year in a row. To Doueiri, this makes sense. “Arabic is important because we are preparing our new generation to face global trends. Italian and German are beautiful and important languages, but students who know them aren’t getting to use them as much as students who know Arabic.”

CSUSB, which is on a quarter system, started offering Arabic in 2001, beginning with just three sections of first-year Arabic. The program has since exploded to 58 different classes, including four years of language, and a variety of content courses taught in Arabic.

Older Arabic programs that have enjoyed robust enrollment for years, such as the one at Georgetown University, have also felt the surge in student interest. Prior to September 11, 2001, there were between 125 and 150 Georgetown students enrolled in Arabic language courses per semester. After 9/11 that number quickly grew, reaching 400 at times, according to Elliott Colla, chair of the Department

of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Georgetown. Enrollment currently hovers at around 350. “We think that the boom in Arabic has ended, for the moment at least,” says Colla. “The new plateau for Arabic instruction is one that should hold strong for the time being. Like all non-European languages, student interest in Arabic is propelled by current events and security discourse, and the revolutions have fueled a broad interest in the region and its language.”

“After 9/11, Arabic was more on the minds of people,” says Ruwa Majid-Pokorny, lecturer of Arabic at the University of New Hampshire. “People aren’t asking ‘Where’s Iraq?’ anymore. Students are intelligent, smart, they pay attention to world affairs, and they know the Middle East is a hotspot. They want to be a part of the global village.”

Arabic Was Growing Before 9/11 But Has Become Even More Popular Since

While the boom in Arabic language has undoubtedly been fueled by the increased public interest in the Middle East since 9/11 and the more recent uprisings across the region, Arabic language studies, which have long been tied to U.S. national security interests, were growing well before 2001 according to Elizabeth Bergman, executive director of the American Association of Teachers of Arabic and associate professor of Arabic at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.



Alexa Smith (shown second from the left), studied Arabic in Morocco in 2012, now uses her language skills in her international education position at Texas Tech University. Here, she is at a women’s argan oil cooperative in the Ourika valley of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. The co-op employs widows from local villages, helping them support themselves and their families. The co-op is also run by women; they process argan nuts to make argan oil, argan butter, and cosmetic products.

“Since the days of Sputnik, the U.S. government has supported language training in the U.S.” says Bergman. Title VI of the National Defense of Education Act of 1958 provided federal funds for U.S. universities to build foreign language programs, particularly for “uncommonly taught languages,” such as Arabic. As a result, national enrollment in university-level Arabic courses rose from 541 in 1960 to 3,466 in 1980, according to the Modern Language Association. It continued to inch upwards for the next two decades. “After 9/11 the upward trend became an upward spike,” says Bergman. “By September 2002, it had become clear to all of the United States that the U.S. interest in the Arab world was increasing and was here to stay. We needed more teachers, more classrooms, more textbooks, and more resources.”

That need was filled, in part, by programs funded through the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) introduced by President George W. Bush in 2006. The NSLI further emphasized the importance of Arabic as a “critical language” and supported a variety of Arabic language initiatives for teachers and for students K-12 and at the university level, including the Critical Languages Scholarship Program, The Gilman Scholarship, and the Teachers of Critical Languages Program. For the University of New Hampshire, which first began offering Arabic in 2005 in response to student demand, support from the Fulbright program has been critical in the university’s

ability to increase its Arabic offerings. Majid-Pokorny recalls, “Each step of the way we were thinking about expanding, but the economy and budget were huge obstacles. Last year we decided to add a third year of Arabic since the demand was clearly there. But we thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if we didn’t have to pay for it?’” The university successfully applied to bring a Fulbright fellow from Egypt to UNH as a language teaching assistant, and, as a result, the department was able to offer a third year of Arabic for the first time. The exposure students have gained to the Egyptian dialect has proven to be an added benefit.

Other programs, such as STARTALK and the Language Flagship program, aim to expose high school students to the Arabic language. According to Wafa Hassan, assistant professor at Western Michigan University and director of the Flagship K-12 Arabic Curriculum Project, it takes between five and seven years to achieve the level necessary to use Arabic academically. Starting in high school gives students the chance to enter college with basic proficiency and move directly into intermediate or advanced classes. As with UNH, more and more schools are realizing a need to provide options beyond two years of language training for advanced students. “What we are seeing,” says Hassan, “is an increase in higher level classes designed to maintain motivation and interest: Arab culture, Arabic literature, media in the Middle East, taught in Arabic.”

Cultural Connections Spark Interest

A growing number of students are pursuing Arabic because of an academic interest in Arab culture or a personal connection to the language, such as students who are of the Muslim faith or have an Arabic-speaking parent but never learned the language. According to Bergman, however, the biggest growth is among those studying Arabic for professional reasons. “Over the last several years,” says Bergman, “we’ve seen an enormous spike in people who believe that Arabic will give them a leg up when it comes to a job.” The idea that Arabic language skills make a job applicant more competitive continues to prove true, and not just for language majors, says Wafa Hassan. “Arabic is one of the most important languages for the United States, not only for national security and the military, but also for business. So many American-based companies working in the Middle East need engineers and other professionals who can speak Arabic.”

“Speaking Arabic was the gateway to my career,” says Cloe Medina Erickson, who received a master’s of architecture from Montana State University in 2000 and then, in pursuit of her goal to work in the Middle East, returned to campus to take Arabic classes. Erickson now lives in Morocco, where she works as an architectural preservationist and founded a nonprofit that focuses on community development in rural Morocco. “They appreciated the effort that I made to learn their language, understand their culture, and make an effort to speak with them in their native tongue,” says Erickson. “I have used my language to converse with our program partners, write



University of New Hampshire student Kerri Hagstrom poses with her University of Jordan Arabic professor, Areej (أريج).

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contracts, and meet with the Moroccan government. I could not do the work that I am doing without knowing Arabic.”

Arabic Language Immersion Programs Abroad Abound

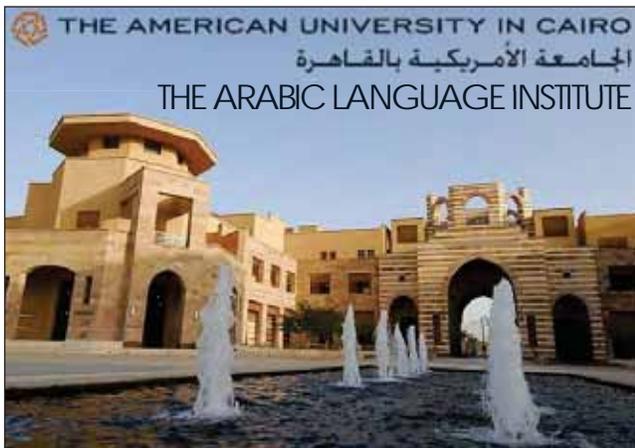
The growth in Arabic enrollment throughout the past decade has also lead to greater participation in study abroad programs in the region. According to the *Open Doors* report by the Institute of International Education (IIE), 2,139 American university students studied in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the school year prior to 9/11. The number dipped to 902 the following year, but then steadily rose over the next decade. During the 2010–2011 school year, 7,206 university students studied in the MENA region, a figure IIE considers conservative since it includes only degree-seeking students receiving academic credit for their study abroad programs.

For students wanting to be immersed in the language, experience a new culture, or practice a specific dialect, there are

more opportunities than ever to study in the Middle East. Many U.S. universities and colleges have longstanding partnerships with schools in the region, while others are choosing to use private companies to arrange in-country logistics for programs led by U.S. faculty. Students are also traveling independently to language centers and universities across the region. In addition to the growing awareness of the benefits of studying abroad, such as better language absorption and improved cultural understanding, Bergman believes that more students are studying abroad because of an increased push toward experiential learning at colleges and universities and greater access to information via the internet. “When students say, ‘I wonder what it would be like to study in Amman,’ they can go online, see pictures, and read the blogs of students studying there,” says Bergman. For some Arabic majors, such as those at Georgetown University, study abroad is a program requirement. “Our program is intensive by American standards,” says Colla. “Still, we understand that fluency is reached only when students immerse themselves in the culture and society of the languages they are studying.”

Montana State University (MSU) was ahead of the curve when, in 1995, it partnered with Al Akhawayn University in Morocco to create an integrated study abroad program. Gabe Lavin, a recent MSU graduate with a BA in anthropology, spent his junior year at Al Akhawayn University learning Arabic and later received a Boren Scholarship funded by the National Security Education Program to continue his studies in Egypt. “If I hadn’t gone abroad,” he says, “I don’t think I would have learned the language. Arabic is harder to learn than other languages. You definitely need to go to a place where it is spoken and pick up on the cultural cues connected to the language. That’s how you learn it.”

In recent years, enrollments in education abroad programs have been impacted by the events in the Middle East and North Africa, but whether the impact has been positive or negative depends on the country. While some programs in Egypt and Lebanon have seen reduced numbers—or in the case of Syria, completely shut down—programs in Jordan and Oman have experienced a surge. David Wilmsen, chair of the Department of Arabic and Near Eastern Languages at the American University of Beirut (AUB), which offers an intensive Arabic-as-foreign-language program, says, “Our enrollments tend to be influenced by regional events, with enrollments dropping when worrisome events occur near the beginnings of terms.” Although applications to AUB’s intensive summer program doubled between 2008 and 2012, enrollment took a hit last summer (to 63 students as



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compared to around 80 or 90 the previous summers) “because of worries about the civil war in neighboring Syria.” In contrast, the Center for International Learning (CIL) in Oman has seen its student enrollment nearly triple since 2011, from 122 students in 2011 to 326 in 2013. CIL President and Academic Dean Larry Brown anticipates there will be an even larger enrollment in 2014 and credits CIL’s growth, in part, to “regional security threats which suddenly mean that ancient and highly safe Oman is being discovered.”

Scholarships Have an Impact

Over the past decade, as the U.S. government has placed more emphasis on Arabic, scholarships to the region for intensive language study have become more plentiful, as well as more competitive. The Critical Language Scholarship program (CLS), which is funded by the U.S. Department of State and currently sends Arabic-language students to Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, began in 2006 with a cohort of 86. In recent years, the number of available scholarships for Arabic has grown to between 175 and 185, with an acceptance rate of 11 percent.

Alexa Smith, a CLS participant in 2012, says that her Arabic improved by “leaps and bounds” during her program in Morocco. Smith

is a study abroad success story, as she continues to use her Arabic on a daily basis through her job as coordinator for the International Sponsored Student Programs at Texas Tech. She regularly interacts with students from the Middle East and feels that her Arabic language skills allow her to “get to know them on a deeper level, get invested in them and not just process their paperwork.” Even though Smith was a German major (and later earned a master’s degree in German), an interest in marginalized immigrant populations led her to choose Arabic as her third language. “I wanted to do what I could to expose people to all the wonderful things that Arabic speakers and Arab cultures have to offer,” Smith recalls. “When you meet people and humanize them, then it is hard for the bigotry to continue.”

According to Wafa Hassan, this desire for cross-cultural understanding is a motivating factor for many young people. “So many students in this new generation of Americans really want to understand Arabic culture and want to communicate with the 350 million people who speak the language,” says Hassan. “This is not a number you can ignore.” **IE**

VICKI VALOSIK is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C. She wrote “If You Invite an International Student Home for Thanksgiving,” about her personal experience in the November/December 2013 issue of *IE*.

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