

International Studies in the U.S.: an Overview

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INTRODUCTION

The generation of international expertise by government grants to university-based interdisciplinary centers that combine area or international studies with foreign language study is found only in the United States. This can be called the "AIFL" model, an acronym derived from Area, International, and Foreign Language studies. The AIFL model could only have arisen in the decentralized, autonomous, and highly competitive context of U.S. higher education. Just how unusual the AIFL model is can be underscored by noting that no other nation has anything similar. Other countries obtain their international expertise through the national academy model, which is basically government think-tanks serving key ministries. The information that results is limited in scope, captive to the government, and policy-focused rather than theoretically-oriented.

ORIGINS

AIFL as it exists in the United States is a consequence of this nation's attempts to perform in the international arena. The United States has been involved in wars and national security crises since it emerged as a great power in the 1890s. Each of these wars or crises has been accompanied by a renewed appreciation of the importance of foreign language fluency and of knowledge about the culture and politics of the enemy. Such competence is the bedrock of military intelligence. Between wars and crises, however, the value attached to foreign area competence erodes. There is a long tradition in American society of suspicion of such expertise, nicely voiced by President Charles Eliot of Harvard, who said that "Prolonged residence abroad has a tendency to enfeeble the love of country."

Opposition to government policy during a crisis can have important consequences, including retaliation against the critics, with negative effects not on only the individuals involved, but on also the nation's competence. The triumph of Mao's Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 was followed by a witch hunt in the U.S. that targeted all the leading American experts on China--- in the press, in academia, and in government. The loss of these experts created a deficit of intelligence on China that took decades to overcome.

In contrast, a good war can have highly positive effects on the relationship between government and other sources of foreign area expertise. The surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 galvanized the American public and swept away opposition to joining the Allies. The War Department realized that it would have to fight a two-front war and that it lacked the foreign area competence to do so.

Even before Pearl Harbor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) recruited university faculty for their area expertise and put them to work as intelligence analysts. They were happy to serve. Studies of national character were commissioned for every country on both fronts. After Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Army established the Army Specialized Training Program, or ASTP, which sent officers to institutions of higher education for crash courses in needed skills, including foreign languages and foreign area studies. The total number of officers trained is not known, but at its high point the ASTP had 150,000 officers enrolled in colleges and universities. In 1943 the Navy set up a similar program, the V-12 Navy College Training Program, which enrolled more than 125,000 officers before it was terminated in 1946.

The ASTP and V-12 programs were highly effective, and they established a model of university-government collaboration that was to be the inspiration for Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958. Other spin-offs of World War II include the Fulbright Act of 1946, Marshall Plan of 1947, and the Point Four Program of 1949, which was later replaced by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and expanded by the Title XII overseas agriculture assistance program, passed in 1975. In short, World War II led to institutions that transformed the nation's ability to function on the world stage.

TITLE VI OF NDEA

The stimulus for Title VI was another national security crisis. The Soviet Union's success in launching the first orbiting satellite, Sputnik, in 1957 led to a wave of public hysteria in the United States. The Eisenhower administration was suddenly on the political defensive. In response, it proposed a new Federal program to support science, engineering, language, and area studies. The point man for this legislation was Eliot Richardson, Assistant Secretary for Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and later, Secretary of Defense and Attorney General under Richard Nixon.

The bill that resulted from Richardson's efforts was the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which included Title VI, which was essentially an updated version of the Army Specialized Training Program. This title authorized partnerships between government and higher education to train foreign language and area experts. Over the next decades new Title VI missions were added, such as outreach, citizen education, internationalizing the undergraduate curriculum, international business education, minority recruitment, language research, and support for overseas research centers.

Because of the tensions between official policy and area experts, the appropriations history of Title VI has been a roller-coaster. The high point in Title VI appropriations was reached early in the Johnson Administration. But as academic criticism of the War in Vietnam grew, the White House became increasingly unhappy with Title VI. The Nixon administration tried to eliminate Title VI funding entirely,

although the Democratic majority in Congress managed to continue the program. During the Carter Administration, Title VI funding improved again. Carter established the Department of Education in 1980, and replaced NDEA with a new Higher Education Act, which incorporated Title VI. However, the first seven budgets of the Reagan administration call for the elimination of all Title VI funding. The congressional defenders of Title VI again rescued it from oblivion, but funding eroded.

Key Title VI constituents eventually mobilized to lobby for Title VI funding. In 1992, four international education associations joined with six higher education presidential associations to establish the Coalition for International Education (CIE). The Coalition now includes more than thirty organizations that work to support Title VI programs. The Coalition's advocacy led to a steady increase in Title VI appropriations, reaching a high point in 2009.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF AIFL

The direct accomplishments of Title VI on AIFL, and the AIFL spinoff effects on higher education in the United States, should be underscored:

There currently 127 National Resource Centers for foreign language and international, and area studies.

- NRC institutions annually produce an average of 2,000 PhDs with language and area expertise and 6,000 graduate or professional master's degrees.
- The best of these students are supported by the FLAS fellowship program.
- Over the fifty-plus years of the program, NRCs have produced approximately 100,000 PhDs and 300,000 MAs with language and area expertise.
- Of these 400,000 degrees, 92% have been in disciplines or professions. Only 8% of the degrees, largely at the MA level, have been interdisciplinary area studies degrees.
- Graduates of these programs staff a high proportion of language and area specialist positions in academia, business, and national security agencies. The Foreign Area Officer Program of the U.S. Army, for example, sends all its officers to Title VI NRCs for M.A. degrees.

The NRCs are responsible for the vast majority of instruction in less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) in the U.S.

- The Michigan State e-LCTL study of 2005 found that NRCs were enrolling 30,000 students in 128 LCTLs.
- The NRCs were offering instruction in 226 LCTLs. In contrast, the Defense Language Institute (DLI) and the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) together were offering instruction in only 75 LCTLs.
- The teaching mission of the NRCs has been supported by instructional materials stemming from the Title VI International Research and Studies Program, including basic grammars for many LCTLs.

The spin-offs from the NRC program have transformed U.S. higher education in the following ways:

- Competition among universities for NRC grants has been so intense that universities now cover about 90% of the cost of NRC operations (compared to the 50% envisioned in the original legislation).
- NRCs were the first interdisciplinary centers to be established on most campuses. Today interdisciplinary centers and institutes are prevalent in U.S. higher education.
- The foreign area collections required by Title VI centers and supported with grant funds led to the building of comprehensive library collections on foreign areas, which are sometimes superior to those of libraries in the countries studied.
- The recruitment of faculty for language and area programs led to the enrichment of curricular offerings, to a rise in student demand for study-abroad programs, and to the faculty expertise needed to establish and staff those programs.
- When Title VI was established there was only one professional area studies association (the Association for Asian Studies). The NRCs founded associations to cover the other world areas. Today there are nine major area studies associations with a combined membership of nearly 20,000 scholars.
- NRC outreach programs work with local schools districts across the nation to support language and area studies in the K-12 curriculum.

EVOLUTION OF AIFL

The study of each world area has its own scholarly tradition, leading to interesting differences. Among the key variables are the ease or difficulty of access for field research, the number and difficulty of languages required, and the strength of counterpart academic traditions and institutions. However, for purposes of the present discussion, the similarities among studies of the different areas are of greater importance.

Criticisms of “Orientalism” or the outdated character of area studies were common three decades ago. Another criticism was that the interdisciplinary character of area centers actually meant “non-disciplinary.” These criticisms may have had some validity in the earlier stages of area studies, when the first generation of area specialists often did have weak language skills, lacked extensive field experience, and were generalists.

The early practitioners of area studies are long gone, replaced by newer generations of specialists trained in Title VI centers, who combine genuine language fluency with extensive field experience. Today’s area specialists meet the methodological and theoretical standards of their disciplines, and so the content of work by area specialists has evolved along with the disciplines themselves. Forty years ago the study of comparative politics consisted largely of case studies of individual countries, whereas today the dominant modalities are cross-national studies of the interactions among specific variables, using as units not just whole polities but often sub-national units like states or provinces, as well as game-theoretic analysis of policy choice and voting behavior.

Another change has been a larger role for humanities fields in area studies. The first area centers consisted largely of historians and social scientists. The other humanities were represented mostly by language pedagogy and comparative literature. The rise of cultural studies greatly expanded the humanities component of area studies. Unlike comp lit, cultural studies de-emphasized the high literary canon in favor of social content, non-elite or counter-elite literature, reading in translation, and a trendy new theoretical vocabulary. This approach soon passed from literature to other humanities fields, such as film and theatre studies, art history, and religion. Faculty from all these fields began to populate area studies programs.

A second infusion of faculty talent into area studies came from the professional schools, which have become increasingly international over the last twenty years. It is now common for area studies programs to include faculty from business schools, law schools, medical schools, nursing schools, public policy schools, and even engineering schools.

The early area specialists provided Americans with information about and interpretations of events in little-known exotic lands. With the rise of modern information technology and the internet, that role has been taken up by foreign-country nationals, usually journalists, politicians, or academics. These practitioners know their countries better than any foreigner and provide up-to-the-moment, if sometimes biased, briefings. What they usually do not provide is a theoretical interpretation of the information they provide.

The a-theoretical nature of a purely national perspective was illustrated in the 1970s when fifteen Latin America nations fell under military rule. Leading thinkers in these countries framed the cause of each of these coups in strictly national terms, leading to fifteen different causal narratives. None of these accounts addressed the questions of why the coups all happened in a relatively brief period. Likewise, in the 1980s when all these military regimes fell during another relatively short period, there were fifteen different unique national explanations. In contrast, Latin America specialists in the U.S. focused their work on the common causes, rooted in global as well as local circumstances, of these two great transitions to arrive at more theoretically-grounded explanations.

In sum, the work of today's area specialists is defined as much by their discipline as by the areas they study, and will evolve along with that discipline. The value they add to the knowledge of foreign areas is because of their disciplines, not in spite of it.

AIFL: COLLAPSE OR RENAISSANCE?

U.S. higher education now faces its greatest financial crisis. Public institutions, which educate the vast majority of Americans, are facing unprecedented budgetary cuts. Universities are invidious and competitive communities in the best of times. In the worst of times, they are Darwinian environments.

The primary source for grants to AIFL programs is of course Title VI. A few other federal and foundation programs are occasional sources of AIFL funding, but none of them provide systemic support comparable that of the major Title VI programs. As long as Title VI programs continue, those centers that have Title VI awards have a good chance of surviving. Title VI is the lifeline of the AIFL system.

However, the AIFL model is fragile because is not a priority for any important institution. Within the university, disciplines, which have faculty lines, take precedence over interdisciplinary programs, which do not. In the Defense Department, combat preparedness has priority over intelligence. For the State Department, hard national interests come before soft diplomacy. Within the Department of Education, K-

12 education is the priority, and post-secondary education (PSE) is an afterthought. Within PSE, the student loan programs are the elephant, and AIFL programs are the mouse. For the Democratic Party, equality-oriented education programs are the priority, not quality-oriented education programs like Title VI. The Republican Party sees education as a local and state matter, not a Federal mission.

The prospects for the Title VI lifeline are therefore uncertain. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan focuses on K-12 education and has evinced little interest in Title VI. However, the Coalition for International Education has been vigorous in its advocacy, meeting repeatedly with officials of the Department of Education and the Office of Management and the Budget to make the case for Title VI. A similar effort will be undertaken in the new Congress.

If the Title VI lifeline can be continued, then the AIFL system in the U.S. will survive. But it may do more than survive, it might even thrive. There are three good reasons to anticipate a bright future for AIFL.

The first reason is the Great Recession is beginning to end and will be replaced by a period of steady growth that will buoy state budgets and bring more revenues to higher education. The second reason is that the rapid globalization is creating an ever larger demand for traditional international education programs, like study abroad, overseas service-learning, and education partnerships abroad.

The third reason is that U.S. higher education is nearing a tipping point in which major curricular reform will take place. There is an increasing demand for a truly international curriculum that would provide global competence to the average undergraduate. Such an education would require of all students mandatory foreign language study, overseas field experience, and required courses on foreign areas and global themes. This curricular reform is already underway in a handful of elite private colleges, where such requirements are mandatory. The market economy of higher education will inevitably drive colleges and universities in this direction, as students vote with their feet for an education that gives them a future in a globalized world.

International and foreign area centers will play a key role in the coming curricular reforms and in providing the courses offering and study abroad venues that will be required. Area, International, and Foreign Language Studies will become a central component of the internationalized university of the future. But to get there, they have to survive the present.

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