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Central and Southwest Asia: A Priority
Royce C. Engstrom, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

The region of the world known as Central and Southwest Asia has become a high priority for education and scholarship at The University of Montana. Many members of our faculty have worked in the region over the years and, as a university, we have assembled a good deal of expertise on matters related to this critical part of the world. Likewise, student interest has grown quite dramatically as students have recognized the importance of Central and Southwest Asia to our country and to the world. We have enjoyed the presence of many students and visitors from Central and Southwest Asia on our campus recently.

Accordingly, the University has recently realized several important developments related to Central and Southwest Asia. The Faculty Senate unanimously approved a new Center for the Study of Central and Southwest Asia at its most recent meeting, and The University of Montana will now submit the proposal to the Montana Board of Regents for their approval. The Center will also form the umbrella under which the University is seeking funding from the U.S. Department of Education for the establishment of a National Resource Center aimed at providing distinctive educational opportunities for university students as well as high school students and teachers.

During this past year, the Faculty Senate and Board of Regents also approved a new major in Central and Southwest Asia, providing new opportunities for students. Interest and enrollment in language courses related to Central and Southwest Asia has expanded to new levels, and during the past year the ASUM actually passed a resolution requesting an Arabic minor. In fact, there is a plan to establish such a minor next year and to create a faculty position in Arabic. For the current year, student interest was high enough to justify departing from the previous consortium approach and offering introductory Arabic ourselves.

As a university, it is imperative that we continually examine our efforts in the international arena to focus on those regions, cultures, and languages that are important in today’s world. Certainly, Central and Southwest Asia is one of those regions. It is gratifying to see so much interest and expertise on this area within our faculty. As a campus, through the efforts of dedicated faculty members, we have developed highly visible programs and interactions in Central and Southwest Asia. An interdisciplinary approach to study necessarily means that many departments and programs have contributed and are involved.

Personally, I had the chance to visit Tajikistan with a contingent from The University of Montana last year. It was an eye-opening experience in many ways and I can’t wait to see other parts of Central and Southwest Asia. In addition, it has been delightful to meet students and visitors from the countries that make up Central and Southwest Asia. Their presence on our campus enriches our lives and our educational programs. I am thankful to all of the individuals who have contributed to the success of the Center and other related activities.

A group of faculty, staff, and graduate students affiliated with the Central and Southwest Asia Program
From Wednesday, April 21, to Saturday, April 23, 2010, the Central and Southwest Asia Program hosted the 8th Annual Central and Southwest Asia Conference at The University of Montana. As in past years, a roster of internationally distinguished scholars and analysts gathered in Missoula to engage the campus community, general public, and one another in dialogue about major issues and problems confronting the countries of Central Asia and the Middle East. As in past years, the three-day event attracted a large public audience. Among the topics addressed were the growing internal crisis in Yemen, recent attempts at governmental reforms in Tajikistan, the rise of Kazakhstan as a regional power, natural resource conservation and the role of Islam in Afghanistan, the politics of Arabic language and dialects in the Arab world and the United States, the everyday challenges of growing up as a Palestinian, the political crisis confronting the Republic of Georgia, and the challenges posed by militant Islam to the ruling elites of Central Asia.

Among the visiting speakers at the conference were Dr. Hana Zabara and Dr. Terrence Potter, both noted experts of Arabic language and literature who teach at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Georgetown University; Dr. Shukri Abed, Chairman of the Department of Languages and Regional Studies at the Middle East Institute, Washington D.C., Senior Research Fellow at the Center for International Development and Conflict (CIDCM), and Associate Professor of Arabic at the University of Mary Washington; Dr. Farid Younos, lecturer of Human Development Studies, California State University - East Bay and TV Host and Anchorman, NOOR Television; Huzeyfe Alkan of Middle East Center-University of Utah; Alisher Khamidov, from the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University; and Aimona Tashieva of American University, Washington College of Law. As in previous years, professors from The University of Montana also presented at the conference and played a central role in organizing its various panels. These included Professors Ardi Kia, Donald Bedunah, Jeff Renz, Samir Bitar, Khaled Huthaily, and Robert Greene.
The Central and Southwest Asia Program (CSWA) has been awarded a grant from the U.S. National Security Agency through its STARTALK program to teach intensive Arabic to high school students in summer 2010. STARTALK is one of the newest programs of the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) announced by former President Bush in January 2006 and is administered by the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland. The initiative seeks to expand and improve the teaching and learning of world languages strategically important for U.S. national security.

STARTALK’s mission is to increase the number of Americans learning, speaking, and teaching critical foreign languages by offering K-16 students and teachers “creative and engaging summer experiences that strive to exemplify best practices in language education and in language teacher development, forming an extensive community of practice that seeks continuous improvement in such criteria as outcomes-driven program design, standards-based curriculum planning, learner-centered approaches, excellence in selection and development of materials, and meaningful assessment of outcomes.”

This is the third time in a row that CSWA receives funding to teach intensive Arabic during the summer. The STARTALK MASI team consists of four experienced faculty/staff. Dr. Mehrdad Kia, Associate Provost for International Programs and Director of CSWA, is serving as Principal Investigator. Dr. Khaled Huthaily, Assistant Professor of Arabic, is serving as Director and Curriculum Developer. Professor Samir Bitar, Lecturer of Arabic, is serving as Outreach Coordinator. Brian Lofink, Liaison of International Programs, is serving as Program Coordinator. The courses will be taught by Professors Huthaily and Bitar, who will be joined by two teaching assistants.

The curriculum will be developed by Dr. Huthaily, who holds an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the UM, based on the Understanding by Design framework, which consists of three stages: (a) identifying desired learning results, (b) determining acceptable evidence of learning, and (c) planning learning experiences and instruction. The goal will be to help students reach the proficiency level of novice-mid to novice-high (Level 1) and the intermediate-low to intermediate-mid (Level 2) based on standardized foreign language proficiency guidelines. In-class activities will consist of instruction that combines listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students will learn about the cultures, history, geography, and religions of the Arab world. They will be involved in extracurricular cultural activities to gain an understanding of Arab cultures in an authentic manner. Technology will be integrated into the curriculum to equip students with the tools needed to be successful and independent language learners in the 21st century. Students will meet and interact with UM students of Arabic as well as native speakers.

STARTALK MASI has been a great success locally and nationally. UM’s 2008 institute was described by STARTALK evaluators as “a model program for learning Arabic” one that “would also provide a great experience for any language teacher, to demonstrate how to engage true novice level students completely in Arabic with multisensory, engaging, and effective instruction and assessment techniques.” The 2009 institute was described as “an exemplary program that is designed to address the very real need for and build the demand for Arabic language programs in the state of Montana.” Evaluators reported that “The University of Montana is leading efforts to internationalize education in the state, in part by providing outstanding support for the implementation of critical language programs K-16. In this four-week project STARTALK resources are providing critical leverage for state resources toward the goal of opening the world to the youth of Montana.”

STARTALK Central has selected Dr. Khaled Huthaily to be a STARTALK evaluator for other teacher and student summer programs. In April 2010, Khaled Huthaily, Samir Bitar and Brian Lofink attended a Pre-Program STARTALK Meeting in Atlanta, GA, during which Huthaily was invited to present on “Tips for a Successful
Program," a recognition of the success that STARTALK MASI has achieved. The 2010 summer institute will run for four weeks, from June 21 to July 16, 2010. We are expecting an enrollment of 30 high school students in the institute’s two levels: (a) Level 1 for new students, and (b) Level 2 for graduates of STARTALK MASI 2008 and 2009. Students will receive five college credits as well as $100 upon successfully completing the institute. The grant will cover the tuition fees, instructional materials, and transportation for field trips. More information about the institute and registration will be available online at www.umt.edu/cap/arabic by May 10th and by contacting Professor Samir Bitar at samir.bitar@umontana.edu or (406) 243-4385.

For the summers of 2008 and 2009, The University of Montana’s Central and Southwest Asia program has offered an intensive Arabic language and culture institute for Montana high school students and the reaction has been impressive. The success of the summer program led to a joint effort by The University of Montana (UM) and the Missoula County Public schools (MCPS) in submitting a proposal for and receiving a grant to introduce Arabic language and culture courses to MCPS middle and high schools.

Arabic classes will start in the fall of 2010, and at the completion of Arabic courses at the high school level, MCPS students will be eligible to enroll in advanced-level Arabic classes at UM. The UM’s team of individuals with diverse backgrounds, skill levels, and areas of focus has been working closely with its counterpart from MCPS to streamline the work needed to ensure the success of the proposed program. We are very well situated to implement the instructional experience gained over the years towards the goals and priorities of the proposed Foreign Language Assistance Program FLAP/MCPS project. As we introduce Arabic to the schools we will utilize a communicative approach emphasizing the three modes of communication — interpretative, interpersonal and presentational. Listening, speaking, reading and writing skills will be integrated to help the students reach the aspired levels and grammar and culture will be introduced within these four language skills. We are currently working on designing a summer camp to launch our joint efforts and on tailoring curricula to meet the goals for MCPS students, particularly addressing cultural proficiency and achievement levels. We have a strong base of Arabic language and culture learners and native speakers into which we can integrate the students and initiate a city-wide conversational program.
The Russian program at UM, housed in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures, offers a major and a minor, as well as a minor in Russian Studies, co-directed by Robert Greene in the History Department. The Russian Section itself has a faculty of two, Associate Professor Ona Renner-Fahey and Assistant Professor Clint Walker. In addition, for the past three years we have had a Fulbright instructor teaching in our first-year language series. This year the Russian program has introduced some curricular changes, including a new General Education course, Introduction to Russian Culture, as well as a new seminar, The Russian Novel. This spring the Russian Studies Program was pleased to host Associate Professor of History Andrew Jenks of Cal State University, Long Beach. Dr Jenks visited with students in Modern Russian Literature (RUSS 313), where he spoke about the Cold War and the development of the Russian Space Program. He also gave a well attended talk based on his upcoming book, “The Cosmonaut Who Couldn’t Stop Smiling: Yuri Gagarin and the Many Faces of Modern Russia.”

Our faculty members have been or will be travelling in Russian-speaking regions of the globe as well. This past summer Clint Walker was selected to participate in a two-week workshop on “The Teaching of Russia’s Cultural Legacy in a Global Context” in Kichkene, Crimea, Ukraine from July 17-29, 2009. This workshop was fully funded by the Carnegie Corporation, the Russkii Mir Foundation, and Temple University. During the coming summer Ona Renner-Fahey will be leading a group of nine UM students to spend three weeks in Russia, first in Moscow and then in St. Petersburg. During the next academic year, Ona Renner-Fahey will be on sabbatical, working on a book project connected with poetic inspiration and the creative process.

UM Russian students have garnered a number of prestigious awards and distinctions this year. One of our Russian majors, Joel Beckham, is the recipient of a highly competitive National Security Education Program (NSEP) Boren Scholarship to study in Moscow next year. Two of our second-year Russian students, Jane Blevins and Travis Vincent, received highly competitive U.S. Department of State Critical Language Scholarships to study in Russia this coming summer. Jane Blevins also won an Honorable Mention for her essay submitted to the Annual ACTR National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest. This year the contest, which includes students at four levels of language, included 1,023 essays submitted from 64 universities and colleges across the nation. Finally, one of our first-year students, Greta Starrett, will have a short story she wrote, “Dusk,” published in the The Birch, a national undergraduate journal of Eastern European and Eurasian culture. We look forward to our students’ continued success!

Persian at UM

Persian I and II were offered during the Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 semesters at The University of Montana. The Persian language instructor was the award winning Co-Director of the Central and Southwest Asia Program, Professor Ardi Kia, who has been recognized for his excellence in teaching and as one of the most popular professors at The University of Montana.

Modern Persian is a spoken language of more than 100 million people around the world. It is an official language of Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Persian is also spoken in Uzbekistan, southwestern Pakistan, northern Iraq, and southeastern Turkey, as well as by numerous speakers living in Europe and the United States. There are more than one million Persian speakers in the United States.

Persian is one of the world’s oldest languages, a well-recognized tongue as early as the 6th century BC. Since ancient times the Persian language has had an enormous impact on a number of other languages. The role of Persian culture in the development of world civilization and its influence on the history and culture of many countries and peoples has been substantial.

Considering recent developments in the world political arena, and especially in the Middle East and Central Asia, the U.S. government deems the study of Persian language as crucial to its national security and promotes Persian language teaching programs as central to the nation’s geopolitical interests.
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