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Students sharpen foreign language skills to gain edge in global economy

Premium content from Business First by Scott Rawdon

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Ohio State University senior [Shannon Braithwaite](#) is ready to apply for a job – in France. She's majoring in international studies with a specialization in world economy and business with the ambitious goal of finding work, potentially as a business analyst, overseas.

Learning French and understanding the country's business culture as part of her collegiate studies is vital to her quest, she said.

[Adam Reiner](#), who graduated from the university's **Fisher College of Business** with an MBA a year ago, took Mandarin classes as an undergrad to prepare for doing business in China. In December, he represented his company, Reiner Realty & Consultants Inc., on a trip to that country to explore investment opportunities.

"Understanding the language is the key to forming the business relationship," Reiner said. "Speaking Mandarin showed that our small company was serious about doing business."

Business students are understanding what Braithwaite and Reiner already know – whether it's landing the job or landing the deal, speaking more than one's native tongue is essential to succeeding in the global economy.

"The trends we see include students studying foreign language as part of an interdisciplinary course of study where they are taking dual majors or major/minors that mix foreign language and another discipline, something like business and French or accounting and Japanese," said [Karen Sobul](#), fiscal officer and grants specialist at the OSU Foreign Language Center.

Students with advanced foreign language skills, Sobul said, can start their careers at higher salaries.

"We see this in particular as it relates to multinational corporations and national security areas, particularly in the priority languages which include Arabic, Chinese and Urdu," Sobul said. "Many businesses now talk about hiring employees that possess cultural intelligence, so when the companies are connecting internationally, they have employees with an advanced knowledge of the culture and customs that make partnerships and cooperations work better."

Away from the comfort zone

Denison University Assistant Professor of Economics [Fadhel Kaboub](#) said Spanish and Chinese are the most popular second languages among his economics students.

He's seen economics students plunge into mastering French, Arabic, German, Japanese, and, increasingly, Portuguese.

At Fisher, there are 285 students who are double majors in business and a foreign language, or have a minor in foreign language. Of those, 145 are studying Spanish.

"There's so much talk about the rise of Latin America," said [Melissa Torres](#), executive director of Fisher's International Programs Office.

With Spanish, many take it up because it was popular in high school and is seen as easier to learn than other languages. Also, many Spanish students can use their language skills in Ohio by working at Hispanic businesses, Torres said.

Torres said 40 percent of Fisher's MBAs are international students and anyone who can speak multiple languages will offer employers a competitive advantage. It also shows they are serious.

"They've invested a significant part of their education into language and it shows they're willing to go out of their comfort zones," she said.

OSU wants to incorporate more foreign language into its business programs. A new program is called Working Spanish for Business, which the OSU Center for International Business Education and Research offers to graduate students who need to learn Spanish for their careers.

Emerging market field study also is popular. Students study a specific emerging market and travel there with a professor. Class curriculum includes the market's socioeconomic structure, history and political system. Torres said a significant number of the program's students are focusing on Brazil.

Torres said all MBA programs will require international experience when OSU switches from quarters to semesters in summer 2012. Students will work with local companies with connections abroad.

"It'll produce a much more globally savvy MBA graduate," she said. "The expectation is that students will speak multiple languages and be willing to go where they're sent,"

Torres said. "Our MBAs are looking beyond the U.S. They see China, Brazil and India as the hot spots."

Staying competitive

It's not the size of the market that makes India, China and Brazil interesting for business students, said [Frederick Schroath](#), associate dean and special adviser to the dean of the College of Business Administration and Graduate School of Management at Kent State University. Technological development is increasing in these nations in computer applications, aircraft design and green energy production.

"If the U.S. is to remain competitive in these industries, we'll need to partner with companies in these rapidly developing countries with huge markets," he said.