

**Language Schools Commencement Address
Mead Chapel, August 14, 2015**

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Thank you, Michael, for your gracious introduction and kind words.

I speak for both Jessica and myself this afternoon, as our work at Middlebury for eleven years was done together, some things more obvious than others, and perhaps less so to colleagues and students in our summer programs. Similarly, and importantly, the passion we feel and the respect we hold for the Language Schools, its leaders, directors, faculty, and students are shared despite our different histories and experiences with the Schools. Not to worry, Michael—there will be no stories this evening about my harrowing—*I mean challenging...I mean gratifying*—experiences in the Russian School 35 years ago.

This afternoon we acknowledge and celebrate our graduates' accomplishments. So first, a warm and hearty congratulations to the graduates this evening. You are the "Centennial Graduates," completing your studies in this the 100th year of the Schools. Though it might seem a tall order to expect you, as Centennial Graduates, to do more than past Language School attendees to address the great deficiency in language and cultural proficiency among the vast majority of Americans, the call for collective and effective action needs to begin sometime and somewhere. What better time than now; what better place than at the Language Schools; and who better to involve than those who have experienced first-hand what excellence in language and culture teaching requires and what it can accomplish?

As many of you heard during the Centennial Celebration last month, the Language Schools have awarded more than 11,500 M.A. and 210 Doctor of Modern Language degrees during their first 100 years of operation. They have also educated more than 45,000 non-degree seeking students for at least one summer session. It is time to marshal those thousands of potential foot soldiers in a national movement to bring the teaching and learning of languages and cultures to the forefront of our discussions about education and into our elementary and secondary schools. *I repeat: it is time to bring the teaching and learning of languages and cultures to the forefront of our nation-wide discussions about education and into our elementary and secondary schools. And in a much less apologetic, tentative way than we have done in the past.*

Over the years Jessica and I have heard inspiring addresses during Language School Commencements here in Mead Chapel. Distinguished academics, journalists, artists, politicians, non-profit global leaders, intrepid volunteers, CEOs, and entrepreneurs have made compelling cases for how Language School graduates, armed with their unusual set of skills—unusual at least for Americans—can engage the world to make a difference in any number of ways: to assist peace efforts, lead humanitarian relief missions, transform local economies and improve living conditions by introducing new business ventures, or fill embarrassing gaps in language and cultural proficiency in high government policy-making departments. All true. But Jessica and I would like to shift the focus of how your special competencies can be directed toward a different demographic. A different cohort. And, perhaps, to a less-celebrated or at least less-glamorous cause: educating our youth, grades K through 12.

The statistics on our country's collective linguistic and cultural competency need not be recited here; suffice it to say that Americans are at the bottom of the list of so-called advanced societies in terms of their knowledge of languages and cultures. The absence or the lack of rigor with which these subjects are taught in the American public school system is not trivial. It will deny future generations of opportunities open to those in other countries, and there are other negative consequences as well. The glaring absence has contributed to an increased level of ignorance among current school-age students related to ethnic, racial, and cultural difference. Such ignorance can easily engender prejudice, and prejudice in youth often leads to knee-jerk and sometimes violent reactions to even minor skirmishes—often rooted in misunderstandings of a culture different from one's own. Such incidences are only likely to increase as the demographics of the country continue to change—becoming more diverse—and the movement of peoples across national borders becomes more commonplace and fraught with controversy.

In calling for a more strategic, concerted, and vocal campaign to elevate the importance and the quality of language and culture teaching in this country, and challenging all of you to play a role in such a campaign, I am not suggesting that Language School alumni have not already contributed mightily in this area over the past century. They, along with their sister Bread Loaf School of English graduates, have populated K-12 classrooms all over the country for generations, so much so that former Vice President for Languages Clara Yu used to refer to the Language Schools as “the Mother of all Language Teachers.”

Yet, despite the significant contributions our graduates have made and continue to make on behalf of language education, there is so much more to be done. Optional language learning during the pre-college years, offered one, two, or even three times per week, which is the best one sees in the majority of our public schools, just won't cut it. It is up to individuals like you, those who understand the importance of raising the bar in this particular curricular area and have firsthand knowledge of what is required to achieve meaningful results, to fight for more. Whether you become a K through 12 teacher, are a parent advocating for your children in their schools, or simply are an enlightened citizen exercising your rights and responsibilities to influence public policy, you need to become an activist. The world today demands more than monolingual, mono-culturally aware youth.

But the challenges are great. Vice President Geisler has spoken and written eloquently about the country's need for a “foreign language reserve,” something, he says, the Language Schools could help create. And of course he is right. But that reserve would require major funding and an enormous shift in attitudes about curriculum and pedagogy in grades K-12. Primary and secondary school leaders must recognize the need for a serious, rigorous, and unforgiving pedagogy—as our Language Schools demand during the summer—and not just more time logged in class. Those leaders would therefore need to recognize that such a pedagogy and curriculum will require significant professional development for K-12 teachers. And any new, rigorous curriculum should not only be offered to those students deemed “gifted:” linguistic and cultural competency needs to be the goal for all students.

Such advocacy must come from beyond the teaching profession: it requires strong believers and supporters at all levels. It is no secret that existential threats rally public opinion and garner necessary funding. Government and private philanthropists are today, quite understandably, aligned in their determination to improve science, technology, engineering, and mathematics or STEM education at all levels. The same cannot be said for supporting the teaching of languages and cultures. Yet, there are signs that the time is right to push hard in this vital area of the curriculum.

Five years ago language faculty, staff, and administrators at Middlebury began discussions on whether to join a program begun at Juniata College called Language-in-Motion. This program provides professional development for K-12 teachers so they can introduce into their classrooms authentic materials and full modules on languages and cultures. It relies on linguists from nearby colleges and universities to mentor teachers and talented undergraduates who have studied languages and spent time abroad to engage primary and secondary school students with presentations and interactive mini-classes. Following many discussions, and after receiving external funding to support the initiative, Middlebury launched its version of Language in Motion in local schools this past academic year.

The experience this first year was consistent with those reported over longer periods of time at Juniata, Dartmouth, Lewis and Clarke, Willamette, and a number of other institutions. K-12 students, without exception, reacted enthusiastically to the program and showed a curiosity that, at other institutions over time has led students, even in the lower grades, to pursue independent in-depth study of cultures to which they were introduced by the college students. More important were the long-term effects. A large percentage of primary and secondary school students showed a greater awareness and sensitivity to cultures different from their own.

College students benefited, too. Those who participated reported how much of a learning experience it was sharing and explaining their knowledge about new places and cultures with younger students. Many of them have since chosen to pursue teaching certificates and careers in primary and secondary education. The host school teachers were grateful for their newly enriched curriculum and the enthusiasm and energy the program brought to their classrooms. And administrators and local school boards should recognize the long-term benefits as well. With the increasing diversity of the country's school-aged population, schools need teachers who are more knowledgeable of and sensitive to multiple cultures in the classroom. By bringing languages and cultures into the primary and secondary school curriculum, more and more teachers will become better prepared for the richer but also more challenging classroom dynamics that come with greater diversity.

The Language in Motion program however, even if adopted nationally, is hardly enough to address the need for the rigorous pedagogy and curriculum required to prepare future generations for their post-high school lives, but the reaction of students in it offers valuable insights and great encouragement for going further in our K-12 schools. Policy makers should never extrapolate from a single student to an entire generation, but one particular example is powerful and instructive. A recent Phi Beta Kappa, Summa Cum Laude graduate of Middlebury, who studied Italian, Hebrew, and Arabic here as an undergraduate, and studied in both the Language Schools and Middlebury's Schools Abroad, illustrates the power and potential of introducing languages and cultures to young students.

This student, from rural central Pennsylvania, was the beneficiary of the Language in Motion program run by Juniata College, a few miles from her home and public school. As a grade-schooler her class was visited by students who studied what to her and her classmates were unknown, exotic (in the good meaning of the word), and exciting parts of the world—places grade school children might never have imagined existed. These interactions sparked an immediate curiosity and launched her deep desire to learn more about other cultures and languages. Though her local schools had fewer formal courses than she perhaps hoped for in languages, her interest in languages and cultures never waned, only strengthened, and eventually brought her to Middlebury.

This student might be an exception in the depths to which she pursued her language study, but not every student needs to study three languages, pursue admission to Middlebury, or even attend the Language Schools. Learning languages and about other cultures consistently and in a deliberate and thoughtful way throughout one's primary and secondary education would be quite enough to improve the woeful state of cultural competency in this country. And there are many examples of how engaging the young can lead to successful broad-based movements and the achievement of important goals: the launch of Sputnik in 1957 focused the country's efforts on science education and the results were resounding; the 1960s saw Lady Bird Johnson launch a campaign, aimed at America's youth, to clean-up the country's highways, and in a generation the interstates looked very different; there was the successful anti-war movement of the 1960s and 70s; the South African divestment movement of the 1980s; and the environmental movement over the past 25 years, most recently the campaign on climate change. All of these were successful in shifting public opinion, and all were aimed at the younger generations, some of them beginning in primary school.

It is now your turn to amplify past efforts to underscore the importance of early language and cultures education. Whether you become a K-12 language teacher or pursue another career, we hope that with your new degrees and all that the Language Schools have taught you, you become determined and articulate advocates: that you will lobby local leaders and public school officials to support language education in a serious way; that you will make the case forcefully that monolingualism is as much a threat to our country and society as falling behind in STEM education; that we need a national initiative to develop and support our language teachers; and that you model the kind of teaching and leadership we so desperately need. Rather than occupying the lowest strata of status in our educational institutions, including our colleges and universities, language educators should be supported and valued for all they have to offer.

And you shouldn't be alone in this challenge. Institutions like Middlebury with its 100 years of leadership in language and culture teaching, could, as Vice President Geisler has noted, lead the effort. One can envision the Language Schools—now *your Language Schools*—becoming a year-round institution rather than solely a summer oasis for intensive language and culture learning. As year-round operations, one can also imagine them conducting groundbreaking research on language acquisition and pedagogy, the results of which would be used to help K-12 teachers become more effective and to support curricular and pedagogical reform in our schools.

With your efforts, and with support from the Language Schools, its dedicated faculty, and the scores of Language Schools alumni, the initiative to revitalize language and culture learning could become a significant agenda item of the Language Schools' second century. The best way to help make this happen is if each of you takes on a piece of this challenge as your own.

Thank you and the best of luck.