

Excerpts of *select* quotes from Remarks by Ambassador Lee Litzenberger, Retired  
2022 Title VI NRC & FLAS Project Directors Meeting, October 28, 2022

- Throughout my 38-year career in the Foreign Service, I have seen firsthand the extent to which our national security and foreign affairs agencies rely on the national pool of area and language experts that you in this room educate every year through the NRCs and FLAS programs.
- Foreign language knowledge and area expertise is absolutely essential to the conduct of diplomacy. As Nelson Mandela said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.” We need to be able to do both.
- Foreign language expertise is essential to diplomacy for three reasons: it opens a wide window into other cultures’ view of the world; it is an effective way to build trust; and it is a powerful way to show respect. It also helps us shape the narrative in the international community – giving us a huge competitive advantage.
- Language is also a powerful way to show respect. In 2006 I was assigned as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Every year in Bishkek there was a huge holiday on the occasion of Nowruz, a Zoroastrian spring holiday. On this day, the government invited key Ambassadors and religious leaders to address a huge crowd of 40,000 in an open square downtown in Bishkek – more people than can fit in Boston’s Fenway Park. Because our Ambassador at the time was a woman, the imam and the local rabbi would not shake hands with her, and I was invited to speak on her behalf. The trick, however, was that my address had to be given in Kyrgyz. Now I didn't - - and don't -- speak Kyrgyz. I speak Russian, and in those days if you spoke Russian, that qualified you for an assignment to Kyrgyzstan. And, most people in Kyrgyzstan spoke Russian. But we wanted to reinforce Kyrgyzstan’s independence, and show respect for the culture. Speaking in Russian would have completely undercut that message. So, two weeks before the holiday, our top local interpreter translated my remarks into Kyrgyz. He wrote it out in Cyrillic text (because I could read and pronounce Cyrillic) and tape-recorded the remarks on a cassette. I practiced listening to this cassette and reading it aloud every day. I met regularly with the interpreter, who would correct my pronunciation and stress. On the day, when I opened my mouth and began speaking to the 40,000 Kyrgyz assembled, the echo from the surrounding buildings delayed the feedback, and I really couldn't hear myself speak. Good thing I had practiced – and practiced a lot. Our interpreter said it worked -- his mother had listened to my remarks on the radio and afterwards told him she had understood everything I said. And the government was impressed with the respect I showed by speaking in their language. That -- showing respect -- was the goal, and it helped build goodwill with the public.
- Diplomacy is simply impossible without foreign language skills and area expertise – to have influence in another country you must understand their culture, show respect, and build trust.

- Our national need for language and area expertise is global; thankfully so is the reach of your programs. And your programs are making a difference every day in our diplomatic engagements.
- When I was in Azerbaijan, the Embassy Political Counselor was a two-time FLAS scholar in Russian and Georgian at [Indiana University]. And the former NSC Director for the South Caucasus was a FLAS recipient in Russian. Both began their government careers already fluent in these languages – saving the government significant time and expense it would otherwise have incurred. Thankfully, this is an increasingly common occurrence in the State Department today, and it gives the Department an enhanced capacity to understand global developments in cultures across the world. This has not always been the case.
- My message to you today is simple: you and the Title VI programs that you implement have a direct and critical impact on U.S. national security. By developing a pool of educated foreign language and area experts that the government, business and academia can and do draw on to better understand all regions of the world today, you directly contribute to protecting our national security interests. And the fact that you do this with incredibly modest government funding [...] makes these programs one of the best investments taxpayers could be making in our national security.
- This is a real need today. There are some 40 active conflicts underway around the world today. Eighty percent of these conflicts are located in Asia and Africa. And over 2,000 languages are spoken on each of those continents. These conflicts are often extremely complex; resolving and containing them takes a deep understanding of the societies involved; the kind of understanding Title VI programs deliver. Some of these ongoing conflicts are major – with over 10,000 casualties – including in Yemen, Myanmar, Ethiopia and Ukraine. All these countries speak hard, less commonly taught languages. The languages Title VI programs support.
- The challenge for you in this room, and for our country, is to maintain the output of linguists and area specialists in less commonly taught languages in an era of declining foreign language enrollment among university students.