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## A Teaching Network Brings Arabic to the Heartland



*Khalil Mazraawi, Agence France-Presse, for The Chronicle*

Jeremy Fowler, an American doctor, tends to a patient at a clinic in Al-Mafraq, Jordan.

*By David Wheeler*

As a student at Montana State University more than 10 years ago, Jeremy Fowler decided to take Arabic, a language he was only dimly aware of and was surprised to learn was available to him. Today he is a doctor, using his Arabic to treat impoverished Bedouins with tuberculosis at a small clinic near Irbid, Jordan.

"I never imagined myself working somewhere like this," he says. "But the language studies prepared me to start helping out immediately."

Dr. Fowler took his courses through the U.S. Arabic Distance Learning Network, which blends videoconference instruction and in-person teaching to provide classes at eight universities in Missouri, Montana, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. About 2,500 students have completed the network's courses, making it one of the country's largest Arabic programs.

Unfortunately, language-instruction advocates say, the network's innovation is unlikely to spread, at least this year. Although the Arabic network is now self-sustaining, the compromise federal budget for the remainder of the current fiscal year may kill a proposal to broaden it to include Portuguese and Mandarin, two languages that could build U.S. connections to important, populous countries. The bipartisan budget measure enacted last month will result in the Education Department spreading cuts of 40 percent across [language-instruction and international programs](#), effectively killing the chances for the language network to expand.

"This country's demand for linguistic and intercultural skills is growing," says Miriam Kazanjian, a consultant with the Coalition for International Education, an advocacy group. "And these cuts are working against that need."

The distance-learning network began at Montana State in 1998, before the terrorist attacks on the United States that heightened the country's awareness of its need for Arabic speakers to decode intelligence and close the cultural gap with the Middle East and North Africa.



Cloe Medina Erickson, an alumna of the program, uses the language skills it taught her as she negotiates agreements to preserve historic buildings in a remote region of Morocco. "Without Arabic I would be completely lost," she says.

"We were looking at adding additional languages," says Norman J. Peterson, vice provost for international education at Montana State, "and it was clear to me it wasn't going to happen if we did it the traditional way." He estimates the cost of a tenure-track language professor, with salary, benefits, and professional development, at \$100,000 annually. And it's difficult, he says, to take native speakers of a language and turn them into skilled, passionate, college-level teachers. "The choice is unaffordability on the one hand or mediocrity on the other," he says.

The model that Mr. Peterson and his collaborators came up with was to spread the relatively expensive and scarce expertise of a professor who knows how to teach a difficult foreign language across an institutional network, resulting in a cost of about \$15,000 for each campus, including a study-abroad program. The professor conducts classes with three or four institutions at a time for two hours each week by videoconference. For another two hours a week, native Arabic speakers who are often college students themselves teach the Arabic novices on each campus under the professor's close supervision.

Once a year, the teaching assistants from all the campuses get together in person with the professor to go over the curriculum and review and improve their techniques. Each year, the network has checked the quality of the program using comprehensive, standardized national tests with a sample of students at the end of their instruction.

"We know that the program can produce proficiency, and it can do so in an affordable way," says Mr. Peterson. In 2002 it won an Andrew Heiskell Award for Innovation in International Education from the Institute of International Education.

The Arabic-studies network tries to connect seamlessly with its study-abroad programs, one at the Alexandria Centre for Languages in Egypt, and the other at Al Akhawayn University, in Morocco. Mr. Peterson says the Arabic teachers in the study-abroad programs find out exactly where the students who are coming overseas left off in their instruction back in the United States and what each student's strengths and weaknesses are.

The network used federal money for its first eight years, but has been financially independent since then. Many years, Mr. Peterson says, it "teeters on the edge." Participating institutions drop out, and new partners need to be found. Even with the program's low costs, university officials often find it easier to cut an externally provided program than to fire a faculty or staff member they know personally. Twice, the program created its own competition: Teaching assistants trained by the network convinced partner universities that they could take over Arabic instruction.

### **Getting Past the Technology**

At the network's instructional heart is Nabil Abdelfattah, an Egyptian-born associate professor who came to the United States in 1981. He has a doctorate in applied linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin and has served as a director of the Arabic School at Middlebury College. For family reasons he lives in the Bay Area, and he teaches from a distance-learning classroom at the University of California at Berkeley, although he is an adjunct faculty member at Montana State. In the classroom, he uses one camera for his face, one camera for documents, and a remote control to switch between the two. "It's very taxing to stand in front of a screen in a room by yourself," he says. "There is no atmosphere except the one that you create."

Mr. Abdelfattah strives to get past the technology to connect with students and to build connections between them, adding humor and camaraderie. "Whether it is in Dayton, Ohio or Bozeman, Montana," he says, "It is one network, one community, one class."

He adds a strong cultural component to instruction, showing documentaries about subjects like a Palestinian poet or the lives of four Egyptian women and holding discussions about topics like why some women wear the *hijab*, or headscarf, and others do not. In a classroom conversation about food that is popular in Arabic-speaking countries, he remembers a Moroccan teaching assistant talking very emotionally about Americans eating couscous purchased in a box, instead of making it at home. Outside the classroom, students follow up with online discussions.

"Teaching Arabic is not just teaching how to construct a grammatically correct sentence or how to say greetings," says Mr. Abdelfattah. "When the students leave us, hopefully they are different than when they come to us."

Like Dr. Fowler in Jordan, some of the network's alumni feel that learning Arabic changed the direction of their lives. After graduating from architecture school and traveling in Egypt and Yemen, Cloe Medina Erickson is restoring historic buildings and doing community development in a remote region of Morocco's Atlas Mountains. Some of the buildings she works on are hundreds of years old and, once used as a combination of granaries, forts, and cisterns, are the village's central civic architecture. She works with local tribes and the government to negotiate written agreements to preserve the buildings. "Without Arabic I would be completely lost," she says.

Cory G. Walters, once an agriculture major at Montana State, remembers taking Arabic just because it seemed exotic. "My mom couldn't understand why the heck I would take a foreign language because I had never taken one in high school," says Mr. Walters, who grew up in Kalispell, Mont. "She was really discouraging me." (His mother has since changed since her mind.)

After a year of study at Montana State and a semester in Morocco, he spent the summer of 2000 in Syria on a study-abroad scholarship. Although he struggled with the infamously difficult language, he says, "I could get around." And he had some memorable experiences. He and a fellow student regularly went to a local eatery in Aleppo, using their "third-grade Arabic" to talk to the owners. A child approached them trying to sell lighters. They rebuffed his effort but engaged him in conversation. Suddenly he blurted out, "Would you like to meet my family?" The students hailed a taxi and went with the lighter salesman to the Aleppo suburbs, where the child raced into his home yelling, "I have some Americans with me." The family members disappeared into their bedrooms and returned in what appeared to be their nicest clothes. That visit began a series of evenings of long meals and conversations in simplified Arabic and "lots of pointing." Each night the family members would beg the students to spend the night instead of returning to their own residence. (They never did spend the night.) As the students were finishing their packing to leave Syria, 16 of the family's members arrived to say goodbye.

Mr. Walters, now an assistant professor in agricultural economics at the University of Kentucky, is focused on his scholarship while he tries to win tenure, but wants to return to international programs later in his career. Learning about a different language and a different culture, he says, "forces you to look at things from different angles."

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