Learning a foreign language is both time consuming and troublesome. I still recall in high school and in college spending hours trying to memorize hundreds of vocabulary words in Spanish and Japanese and the dozens of ways to conjugate verbs. I still cringe when thinking about the deep embarrassment of those awkward moments when I tried to express complex thoughts in front of my foreign language classes using kindergarten level terms because of my limited vocabulary. Although these were difficult times in my international academic training, I certainly do not regret it. Looking back over my 20 year professional career in public policy and international business, my foreign language training prepared and inspired me to think globally about my future, helped me make great friends around the world, and opened doors for me in my career. In short, learning foreign languages did not just give me ways to communicate with people in other countries, but it deepened my understanding and appreciation for the rich and complex world we live in. Today, with the world’s borders more porous than ever, I believe foreign language training needs to be an important part of any serious student’s academic curriculum.

Recent scientific research on the brain suggests that learning foreign languages makes students smarter overall. Among the many benefits, it increases students’ mental focus, reading and writing abilities, and even improves mathematical skills. I do not know if my geometry or calculus grades jumped up because I was studying Spanish or Japanese, but it did sharpen my critical thinking and broadened my perspective about the world. It opened my mind to new cultures and new ways of thinking. It gave me the chance to consider foreign cultures against my own values and traditions and gave me a deeper respect for our multi-faceted world. Through language learning, I was exposed to a different set of aesthetics, cuisines, philosophies, politics, histories and traditions. All this classroom learning naturally became the catalyst for me to travel and study abroad to further enhance my international education through seeing and experiencing foreign cultures.
One of the most rewarding parts of learning foreign languages is that it helped me to make connections with people overseas. It is amazing how people’s perception of Americans abroad change when they speak the language of the host foreign country. For me, it immediately transformed the way people perceived me from an outsider to a friend. Even though initially my conversation skills were quite elementary, it allowed me to build trust more quickly and to establish a stronger relationship with people. In my small way, through the time and resources spent to learn foreign languages, I was showing honor to the mother countries of these languages.

Most recently, I came to realize how making connections through learning foreign languages can even save lives. The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana trains young American military personnel headed to Afghanistan in the local indigenous languages and cultures. For many of these soldiers, these classes are their first exposure to the Muslim religion, Afghan culture and the Pashtun and Dari languages. Through language and cultural education, one of the many goals is to train these young Americans to be soldier-diplomats on the field. Alums come back from their tours with stories of arbitrating disagreements between Afghan leaders, persuading villagers to collaborate with U.S. forces, and building deep friendships with locals. These young, trained soldiers were restoring peace in these war torn societies and helping to rebuild a country, which could only be facilitated through language and cultural understanding, not through guns and bombs.

Finally, with people, information and capital flowing more freely than ever, the ability to think critically across different societies, to communicate in different languages and to form connections with a variety of people internationally is becoming more important than ever. The world is becoming more competitive and unfortunately, Americans are falling behind.

When traveling overseas to visit foreign schools and universities, I am quickly reminded of how American students are losing their edge on a number of fronts. We, of course, read about how students in the United States rank far behind many of their Asian and European counterparts in math and science. In addition to these subjects, foreign language training is perhaps another area where Americans are lagging as well. These same foreign countries are actively educating their young students in English starting from elementary school. For some Americans, this may be
an excuse for why U.S. citizens do not have to learn other languages because everyone is learning English anyway, but this is a false sense of complacency. Yes, today, we live in a world where the United States is still the global leader in a number of sectors, but we may be heading into a future world where our children and grandchildren will no longer view the United States as the only dominant force in politics, economics, business, science and/or technology. In this probable future environment, our multilingual foreign competitors will have the advantage over monolingual Americans.

In short, if we are serious about educating global leaders for tomorrow, we need to have students who can engage many different societies and be able to build cooperation between them. Foreign language must be an important part of this endeavor. The pursuit of foreign language education should not be considered a luxury to be sought by a few. Rather, foreign language instruction should be a core element to our education and taught as early as possible.