

VIEWPOINT

Breaking Language Barriers

The National Security Education Program is filling a critical need for international skills.

BY RICHARD COMFORT

Recruiting workers with strong foreign language skills, especially in national security roles, is an ongoing struggle for federal agencies. But the National Security Education Program is providing some relief.

Designed to build a broader and more qualified pool of candidates with foreign language and international skills, NSEP focuses on the cultures of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. The program is administered by the Defense Department and a 13-member advisory board chaired by Samuel D. Kleinman, deputy assistant secretary for readiness. Other members include senior officials from the Homeland Security, State, Commerce, Education and Energy departments.

The Army Intelligence and Security Command's National Ground Intelligence Center in Charlottesville, Va., is one organization that has benefited from this program, which has referred job candidates with critical language capabilities and superb academic credentials.

The National Ground Intelligence Center provides national security data and analysis to policy-

makers which has helped the National Ground Intelligence Center bring on quality candidates. Job descriptions for military intelligence analysts do not specify particular academic disciplines, such as anthropology or sociology, and do not require language expertise. Schedule A allows hiring officials to emphasize academic disciplines and language skills without the complications and delays of creating job descriptions. In addition, a database of program participants with particular academic or language skills is available to managers at www.nsepnet.org.

Under the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act, heads of agencies or offices with national security responsibilities are authorized to appoint NSEP award recipients to the excepted service. After two years on the job, the appointee can be converted without competition to a career appointment. This authority should prove beneficial to agencies that relied on the now-extinct Federal Career Intern Program.

The National Ground Intelligence Center has hired more than a dozen NSEP scholars and fellows, who are committed, hard-working and knowledgeable

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makers in Washington, operational forces around the globe, acquisition executives and force planners. Its detailed assessments of the issues underlying insurgencies and conflicts around the world require analysts with foreign language skills, but also with social science backgrounds.

The center has leveraged NSEP, which awards fellowships and scholarships to students who develop independent overseas projects combining language and cultural studies with practical experience. NSEP also provides intensive English language instruction and professional development for U.S. citizens who are native speakers of languages critical to national security missions, such as Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Pashto, Persian and Swahili.

Upon completion of their NSEP-funded study, award recipients can be appointed to federal positions noncompetitively under Schedule A hiring authority,

able in their fields of study. One went on to win an award for outstanding federal service. Their language skills and cultural insights have been a tremendous boon to the center's research.

These scholars and fellows are a valuable resource for agencies, and once hired, they should be provided training funds to maintain their language skills in subsequent years. After acquiring intermediate and often superior skills in such languages as Arabic, Farsi, Mandarin and Russian, it is only natural for employees to have a strong interest in maintaining these hard-won skills with periodic advanced courses. It certainly is in the best interest of agencies, and government as a whole, to make sure these skills don't atrophy. 

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