

Can Congress Fix Middle Eastern Studies?

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Brief Analysis

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Title VI

Title VI is a program of federal subsidies for area studies in higher education, funding university-based national resource centers and graduate fellowships. The program has been administered lightly by the Department of Education for over forty years. After the September 11 attacks, the analytical shortcomings of academe, especially in Middle Eastern studies, were obvious and should have prompted a debate concerning diversity and perspective within the field. Yet, higher education lobbyists stole a march on academe's critics. They promised Congress that more money for Title VI would translate into more security for the United States, and they received a 26 percent increase in appropriations. Debate was stifled by the appropriations windfall of September 11.

Given the government's current shortfall in manpower focusing on areas such as the Middle East, Congress is willing to put even more resources into area studies. But Congress wishes to change the terms of the contract to ensure a better return on public investment. That is the purpose of the International Studies and Higher Education Act (H.R. 3077).

H.R. 3077

Passed in the House last month, H.R. 3077 is part of the overall reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, of which Title VI is a part. The bill, which has now gone to the Senate, would establish an independent international higher education advisory board to advise the secretary of education and Congress on how Title VI might best meet national needs. The board's seven members, who would meet annually, would be chosen as follows: two would be appointed by the speaker of the House, two by the president pro tem of the Senate, and three by the secretary of education (two of whom would represent government agencies with national security responsibilities). The board would only serve in an advisory role, completely independent of the Department of Education, which itself would remain responsible for oversight of Title VI.

What the Board Will -- and Won't -- Do

As emphasized in H.R. 3077, the board is charged with ensuring that Title VI programs reflect "diverse perspectives

and the full range of views" on world affairs. Yet, the legislation does not permit the board to "mandate, direct, or control an institution of higher education's specific instructional content, curriculum, or program of instruction." Some have argued that the board's mandate to promote diversity would somehow silence critics of U.S. policy or the situation in Iraq. That claim is absurd; "a full range of views" necessarily includes every view and excludes none.

The board's purview includes three specific areas:

Outreach: All national resource centers are required to engage in outreach activities to the general public. Outreach is not university curriculum; it is done at the behest of the government and must be monitored to ensure that it provides "diverse perspectives and the full range of views."

Criteria for fellowships: Fellowships that could potentially provide government manpower are not currently prioritized according to national needs. The board would establish criteria to help programs meet these needs.

Selection criteria for national resource centers: The board would ensure that the selection process produces a diverse network of resource centers, specializing in different areas, and from diverse perspectives.

No amount of tweaking Title VI will cure the fundamental ailments afflicting area studies. Yet, recent increases in funding have made the government complicit in intellectual stagnation. Title VI reform, through H.R. 3077, provides an opportunity for reversing that stagnation via the advisory input of a board composed of wise men and women. It is the very least Congress can do.

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Why Reform?

Tradition holds that the purpose of academic freedom is to expose society to a wide array of arguments and perspectives. The governing principle of such freedom is to promote the debate of controversial ideas, based on the assumption that, in the marketplace of ideas, good ideas will carry the day. Nevertheless, academic institutions have become increasingly one-sided. Currently, a supporter of U.S. policy in the Middle East, Africa, or Latin America, whether liberal or conservative, would find it difficult to sustain a career in the academy. As long as this situation holds, academic freedom is in serious trouble.

Area studies programs receive federal subsidies because they are supposed to perform a special service for the country. Such programs are meant to contribute to national security: indirectly, by increasing the total fund of knowledge about other parts of the world, and also directly, by helping to train potential recruits for government service. The large size of the subsidies is based on this presumed contribution to national security. Hence, the government has a right and an obligation to ensure that the subsidies are accomplishing their purpose. Moreover, taxpayers should not be asked to subsidize programs that promote politically one-sided views. H.R. 3077 addresses these concerns in a manner that does not inhibit free speech or a professor's autonomy in the classroom.

The Mandate of H.R. 3077

All too often, Title VI outreach programs, which are meant to inform K-12 teachers, present a politically one-sided view. H.R. 3077 aims to correct this problem by rewarding area studies programs that present multiple perspectives; such programs will be given preference when applying for Title VI funds.

Congress increased Title VI subsidies by \$20 million after September 11 due to the government's drastic shortfall in individuals with specialized language skills and area knowledge. In order to justify this increase, Congress must have a mechanism to ensure that the subsidies achieve the end for which they were designed. H.R. 3077 would accomplish this goal in two ways. First, area studies programs that have a great track record in training students for government service would receive preference when applying for Title VI subsidies. Second, the newly created advisory board would be able to survey and report on each field's contributions to producing government-service

candidates. These are gentle, nonmandatory, positive incentives for encouraging universities to promote a diversity of perspectives in area studies. Universities with a good record in designing outreach programs that fairly represent many viewpoints of foreign policy would get a leg up in Title VI funding, as would programs that indirectly help address the government's current shortage of area specialists. H.R. 3077's sole purpose is to establish mechanisms for ensuring that special government subsidies are achieving the purpose for which they were intended.

Will It Work?

Hopefully, positive trickle-down effects will result from H.R. 3077's call for diversity in outreach programs and encouragement of government service. These goals might spur colleges to hire a more intellectually diverse faculty. Such hiring practices will not be mandatory, however. The best that can be done to encourage change is to create incentives for diversity that do not encroach on the classroom or on free speech.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ryan Rikansrud. ❖

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