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Tribute to John Grandin

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Letter to the Editor

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Against all odds: The Success of John Grandin's Rhode Island Model

The concept of going “against all odds” characterizes the ideal American hero: An individual striving to overcome barriers put in place by the less enlightened. The protagonist, driven by an inner force, pursues what is understood to be inherently just or right for the common good. Often portrayed in classic movies, the hero prevails in the end—against all odds—and everyone in the spectacle finally rallies behind the cause. And, at least in the older classics, the hero is modest and unassuming and only willing to take on the role because no one else will do it.

There is no doubt that when we look at what John Grandin has accomplished with the International Engineering Program at the University of Rhode that he is such a classic American hero. It is especially fitting if you add in the part about modesty. The only part that doesn't quite fit is the part where everyone gets behind the cause. Whereas many applaud what John has done at URI, the fact is that few in the field of languages really have understood the importance of what John Grandin has achieved for their own campuses. Few have grasped that he has provided a model for not only the survival but also the growth of modern languages at our nation's colleges and universities. Simply put, John has placed language learning at the center of the undergraduate experience.

In many cases, one can attribute the lack of understanding of John's success from members of the modern language field to that of general academic disinterest from within the broader social and economic context in which they operate. Many language faculty members have academic interests that do not always have clear connections to the broader and more central role that modern languages play in U.S. economic and national security. Understanding the important of high-level language proficiency as something more connected to the overall undergraduate experience is not a perspective that has usually been part of faculty training and formation for graduate students in language programs. In most cases, language faculty members have not been hired or promoted to work with other disciplines and professions at the undergraduate level. This, as I will address below, has begun to change.

To be fair to the modern language field, lack of awareness of the importance of language proficiency to our national interest permeates all levels of our society. In the United States today, the most rudimentary framework for a national

¹ The views expressed in this personal tribute are those of the author and do not represent the Department of Defense or any other federal agency.

approach to language study is absent. Despite the clear need for professionals with high levels of language skills expressed by leaders of government agencies and increasingly from business, there is little or no inclusion of language as a core educational standard in our schools. There are few examples of entrance requirements to college and university with clear expectations for language proficiency. Further, the concept of a well-educated college graduate entering the professional workforce in our society still does not generally include an *expectation* of language proficiency or overseas cultural exposure. For this reason, the lack of a clear comprehension of the implications of what John had achieved within the broader field of modern languages is regrettable—but perhaps understandable—given the challenges we face regarding language learning in the society in which we live.

I think that it is important that I point out, however, that some of the misunderstandings of John's International Engineering Program (IEP) over the years have been based on a mischaracterization of his efforts. Since the beginning, a few individuals have portrayed the IEP as a clear and present danger to modern language departments. Those who portray John's innovation in this light seem to fear that John's program will eventually relegate language departments to merely a utilitarian role in the universities or, even worse, to the role of servants to the professions and disciplines. Many who are quick to reject the Rhode Island approach on these grounds somehow overlook the fact that in the fall of 2011 the University of Rhode Island had well over 120 German majors, and is now at 135 majors, which makes it the second largest German program in terms of major enrollment in the country behind Michigan State University, a university with a much larger overall enrollment. Add in the enrollments of French, Spanish, and Chinese, and the University of Rhode Island has one of the largest language departments in the country.

These data alone should demonstrate that the Rhode Island model does not force language study to be subservient to the professions and disciplines. Instead, as I have already stated above, success of the IEP came by making language *core* to the entire undergraduate experience for students, not peripheral or secondary. Such a fundamental transformation of the undergraduate experience has, in turn, provided a much more meaningful liberal arts experience—something that is sometimes neglected in many college curricula across the country, especially in engineering.

Before I proceed, it is important to point out that the URI Engineering Department was equally risk-taking and visionary when this program was first started. Whereas today the field of engineering has been at the national forefront of internationalizing or globalizing its curriculum, URI's IEP had few peers 25 years ago when the program started. Even today, after a decade and a half of dissemination efforts through the URI-sponsored Annual Colloquium on

International Engineering², engineering programs in the United States that embrace “internationalization” through the emphasis on advanced language learning are in the minority. Just as members of the modern language field were skeptical or dismissive of the IEP, many members in the field of engineering never completely accepted the idea of language learning as a component of “internationalization.” There are some who believe that languages “get in the way” of internationalization efforts. In a world where engineers are assumed to speak English anyway, language learning for U.S. engineering students is seen by some in the field as unnecessary or as inhibiting a larger number of students from participating in overseas programs, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This particular point of view, coupled with a growing trend among some educators to see language learning as elitist, costly, and/or unnecessary, has fueled the justification of “language zero” approaches to “global studies.” It doesn’t help that this approach is an easy sell to those who develop overseas programs for American students who, without the correct guidance, can be easily convinced that language learning is unnecessary for their personal and professional future.

In the end, the success of the Rhode Island Model has come about through the fusion of two fields that, ironically, were not particularly interested in each other, with reluctance on the part of languages to promote proficiency for professional purposes.

The National Context of John’s Success

Despite everything I have said above, I’m not pessimistic about the future of language learning in America. Though there have been budget cuts across the board—especially to state education and university programs and the recent cuts to the Department of Education Title VI Programs—I believe there is room for cautious excitement about the promise for language learning.

What has happened since John started his program is that the world has changed. The need for highly skilled professionals in all sectors, public and private, has grown. This has been particularly the case in the public sector, where the recognized requirements in the federal government for professionals of all backgrounds, civilian and military, with high-level language skills is becoming increasingly acute. As a nation, we draw our educated professionals initially from our schools and ultimately from our colleges and universities, whether these professionals work in the private, nonprofit, or public sector. Students and professionals who achieve excellent language proficiency are in fact finding a great response in all of these sectors.

There have been a number of innovations since the initial days of the Rhode Island Model. Over the past 10 years, the National Security Education Program (NSEP) has undertaken new efforts to increase language capabilities across the

² This effort was originally funded in 1998 through a Grant under the Program “Dissemination Proven Reforms” as part of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

board, from K-12 education to in-service training and language sustainment, increasingly recognizing the need for language skills as a core competency. Most important to these efforts has been The Language Flagship, which today involves 26 universities in the United States, including the University of Rhode Island. Like John's IEP, the Flagship program puts language at the core of the undergraduate experience, but instead of focusing on engineering majors at one institution, Flagship programs are designed to develop language proficiency of students in all majors to the equivalency of the Superior Level on the American Council for Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale in speaking, reading, and listening.

The Flagship effort has, as a result, created a new pool of global professionals, who have successfully completed undergraduate studies at 26 institutions while at the same time mastering Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, and Turkish. Like the IEP graduates, these graduates are multi-faceted and multi-skilled, experienced in overseas study and work, highly proficient in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They are, at graduation, experts on cultural nuances and regional differences, and confident in their abilities. These students have begun to make their mark and, what is most important, the baseline quality of these graduates is far beyond what anyone thought possible just five years ago.

The similarity between the IEP and the Flagship models made the University of Rhode Island a natural choice to attract a Flagship program. Because the University of Rhode Island already had the dual-degree structure in place, including a year of intense studying and interning abroad, the IEP was able to bring engineering students into the Flagship effort, thus expanding the traditional Flagship majors into the STEM disciplines. The Flagship affiliation allowed URI to expand its language offerings into Chinese, a move that further enhanced the public-private partnership between URI and Rhode Island companies with global operations, several of which had approached John Grandin about the need for engineers proficient in Chinese language and culture.

The Flagship program has been followed by additional efforts to create opportunities for language learning at colleges and universities. The NSEP-funded Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) Project Global Officers Program trains undergraduate students studying to become future military officers in basic language and cultural skills. A smaller group of these ROTC students is joining the Flagship program as well.

As a result of these activities, we have seen the growth of a vibrant group of academic professionals working together to bring about these kinds of results in language proficiency and cultural skills to a growing number of students, who have gone on and used their language skills in their personal, academic, and professional lives.

The Grandin Difference

John Grandin has made a difference because he set the stage for the larger transformation of the undergraduate experience to make language learning a core aspect of the undergraduate experience. Today we understand much better that John's idea wasn't just about changing engineering and language education. Ultimately it made a fundamental impact on undergraduate education at University of Rhode Island by providing purpose and relevance to the students' efforts.

The model also provided solutions to major challenges related to the field of engineering, such as increasing the participation of women and underrepresented groups in engineering sciences. John and his staff found that the IEP attracted a different type of student to engineering and as a result, not only did the IEP staff see an increase in participation of women and minority students, the program saw a much higher retention rate for these students participating in the IEP.

But let's not forget that John succeeded in his primary goal. During a time when most members of his field of German languages and literature were lamenting declining enrollments, closing departments, and suffering hiring freezes across the country, his program was busy hiring full-time, tenure-track faculty, turning the German program into one of the most vibrant language programs in the nation.

Today, German IEP majors at URI have all of the essential knowledge of any German major across the country with the added benefit of having studied, lived, and worked in Germany. And as such, they find themselves equally comfortable speaking in German about culture, film, and literature as they do speaking about semi conductors, electric cars, or German business practices. And as John's graduates will point out themselves, the program made all the difference in the world in their success. The same can be said today for the French, Spanish, and Chinese IEP programs at URI.

One area of disappointment, however, has been in the lack of will on the part of the foreign language and engineering fields to embrace the model as a national solution. I have heard some dismiss John's program as being "not replicable." This may have been the case in the early years. But as we have seen with the Flagship program, the fact is that we know that the core idea of John's program, to make language central to the undergraduate experience, is in fact not only replicable, it is the most compelling part of the idea to attract students to the institutions that build these programs.

What is most heartening is that college students—and their parents, who most often help bankroll the increasingly expensive undergraduate experience—are enthusiastic about the opportunities provided by language-centered programs such as the IEP and Language Flagship. Graduates of these programs go on to

work in a whole variety of professions, including graduate study in the field of languages and area studies.

Finally, a true test of a successful innovation comes when it remains fully intact and thriving following the departure of the original change agent. John's retirement has meant the beginning of an entire new chapter of the IEP under the leadership of Sigrid Berka. We look forward to many years of success in Rhode Island under Sigrid's new leadership and I, for one, will be cheering from the sidelines.