

# The Importance of Asia in the Liberal Arts

**ASIANetwork**  
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The postwar study of Asia at colleges and universities in the United States began in earnest when the U.S. Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958, “[t]o strengthen the national defense and to encourage and assist in the expansion and improvement of educational programs to meet critical national needs.” In response, many leading American research universities used funding from the NDEA to create country and regional interdisciplinary centers. And liberal arts colleges, sometimes independently and sometimes as a consortium, began creating undergraduate programs that offered Asian languages, culture, and study-abroad experiences.<sup>1</sup>

Even before the 1958 NDEA, the study of Asia served larger societal--and often national--purposes, e.g., rebuilding the country’s relationship with Japan, responding to the 1949 revolution in China, understanding Korea and Southeast Asia in succeeding decades during the years of Cold War conflicts and negotiations. More recently, as Asian economies developed, business relationships deepened and became a driving rationale for the study of Asia. The growth of the global economy, increased travel, and the cross-fertilization of arts and cultures have brought an awareness of Asia and its significance into the lives of most Americans. This awareness, while mostly positive, sometimes brings with it an antagonism based on competing economic and political ideologies; and as government policy and academic pursuits have intertwined, tensions sometimes emerge.

Since its inception in 1992, ASIANetwork has been committed to promoting the teaching about Asia at the undergraduate level. Whether colleges offer fully constituted Asian Studies programs or weave Asian topics across departments, programs, and general education, Asia in the undergraduate curriculum remains of critical importance. In times of financial uncertainty, many colleges are forced to consider competing curricular interests. The information below illustrates the vital importance of educating students about Asia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ASIANetwork’s mission encompasses East, Southeast, and South Asia. For the purpose of this document “Asia” primarily refers to these geographic areas and not the entirety of the Asian continent.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the history of Asian Studies in the United States and recommendations for its future, see Donald R. Davis, “Three Principles for an Asian Humanities: Care First ... Learn From ... Connect Histories.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. 74, No. 1 (February 2015), pp. 43-67.

### ***Importance of Asia in global affairs***

- The continent of Asia makes up nearly 30% of the world's land area and roughly 60% of its population.
- China and India have the largest populations (over 2.8 billion total) with the United States as third with just over 330 million as of 2020.
- The United States, China, and Japan respectively are the three largest economies in the world.
- China, Japan, and South Korea are in the top six countries in terms of total trade with the United States. The top 12 countries include six Asian countries.<sup>3</sup>
- The COVID-19 pandemic has made cooperation among U.S. and Asian scientists crucial for global health.
- Solutions to the world's environmental challenges of the next half century will require collaborative efforts with Asian scientists and policymakers.
- The potential for confrontation between China and neighboring South, East, and Southeast Asian states regarding disputed territorial claims and access to vital water, food, and mineral resources, both on land and at sea, have implications for trade and political interaction far beyond the region.
- In many Asian societies experiencing extensive and rapid socioeconomic change, individuals and social groups have begun to question the enduring hierarchy between the United States and Asian countries in trade and strategic issues.
- Ongoing interethnic and interreligious conflicts in South, Southeast, and East Asia challenge educators to present a more nuanced understanding of the region.
- Social movements for democratization in diverse parts of Asia, including South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand, have offered opportunities for comparative and global understanding of democracy as a political system and a social condition.

### ***Increasing career opportunities for working in Asia or with Asian enterprises***

- Understanding Asia is crucial to what global strategist and author Parag Khanna calls the "Asian century."<sup>4</sup>
- American companies, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, colleges and universities, and other enterprises increasingly engage with their counterparts in Asia.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/toppartners.html> (Data from 2020)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.paragkhanna.com/>

- Metropolises in Asia, including Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo, and Shanghai, have increasing demands for professionals with international backgrounds in fields such as education, finance, law, business, marketing, advertising, information technology, art, performance, and entertainment.
- As noted by the World Economic Forum<sup>5</sup>, “Asia’s rise has been swift. Home to more than half of the world’s population, the region has climbed from low- to middle-income status within a single generation. By 2040, it is likely to generate more than 50% of world GDP, and could account for nearly 40% of global consumption.”

### ***The Importance of Asia in the Liberal Arts***

- Studying Asia is a way to engage issues of diversity beginning with understanding others and moving to more difficult issues of inequality, human rights, freedom, and power.<sup>6</sup>
- The study of Asia is a central means of achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes gained from a liberal education as defined by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, such as:
  - Engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring
  - Intercultural knowledge and competence
  - Civic knowledge and engagement--local and global<sup>7</sup>
- Language study has long been a central component of a liberal arts education.
  - Despite a significant decline in foreign language study in U.S. education, Korean and Japanese language study has increased, and together with Chinese, rank among the top five non-European languages studied at American colleges and universities.<sup>8</sup>
  - Asian languages are linguistically and culturally distant from American English. According to the U.S. Defense Language Institute, Asian languages are Category III and IV languages, the highest levels of difficulty for native speakers of American English. Therefore, it is crucial for students to start robust study of Asian languages and cultures during undergraduate years, if not earlier. Many students enter college having already studied an Asian language and desire to continue their study.
  - A third of U.S. employers reliant on foreign languages indicate that their foreign language needs are not currently being met by their employees.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/10/has-world-entered-asian-century-what-does-it-mean/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aacu.org/node/4084>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aacu.org/essential-learning-outcomes>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mla.org/content/download/110154/2406932/2016-Enrollments-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/tle/TLE\\_AugSept19\\_Article.pdf](https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/tle/TLE_AugSept19_Article.pdf)

- Nearly one in four U.S. employers surveyed acknowledged losing or being unable to pursue a business opportunity over the singular lack of foreign language skills.<sup>10</sup>
- Among the 15 critical languages defined by the U.S. Department of State, most are Asian languages.<sup>11</sup>
- The study of Asia, among other regions, is central to disciplines and interdisciplinary programs, and language study requires a supporting curriculum that puts language into cultural and historical context.
- Study abroad is an essential component of undergraduate liberal arts education
  - China and Japan are among the top ten destinations for U.S. study-abroad students and lead among non-European and non-English-speaking destinations.<sup>12</sup>
- South and East Asia represent important destinations for students pursuing postgraduate scholarship and fellowship opportunities.

### ***Asian students at U.S. colleges***

- Among the over one million international students enrolled in U.S. higher educational institutions, the top three are Asian: China, India, and South Korea. Of the top eight, six are Asian. The other two are Saudi Arabia and Canada.<sup>13</sup>
- For many liberal arts and other colleges, Chinese and Indian students make up the majority of the international student population. In addition to tuition dollars, these students bring their talent, often continuing their U.S. residency beyond their undergraduate study through graduate school or employment.
- Academic and co-curricular experiences that engage diversity in general and provide ways for domestic students to learn about the countries and cultures of their international student peers create a campus environment that fosters the integration of international students.
- U.S. colleges play an important role in educating non-Asian students about Asia and in presenting to Asian students additional, sometimes competing, narratives in understanding Asia.
- Interest in the liberal arts is growing in Asia. Almost 40% of non-U.S. liberal arts institutions worldwide are in Asia.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.actfl.org/resources/press-releases/american-council-the-teaching-foreign-languages-releases-study-value-language-skills-among-us-employers>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.clscholarship.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.iie.org/opendoors>

<sup>13</sup> <https://educationdata.org/international-student-enrollment-statistics>

<sup>14</sup> <https://fulbright.edu.vn/confronting-the-challenges-of-the-liberal-arts-in-asia/>

### ***Continued interest in Asia among Asian-American and other students***

- While Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies differ from Asian Studies in important ways, they also overlap with and reinforce each other.
  - The ongoing development of transnational approaches in Asian Studies and Asian-American Studies has created synergies between these two fields of study, thereby expanding and deepening how we think about and experience Asia.
  - Long-overdue efforts to address racism, inequality, and social justice in academia and broader society has resulted in increasing interest among Asian American students and others in exploring their historical and cultural heritage, along with the Asian American experience.
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### **About ASIANetwork**

A consortium of over 160 North American colleges and universities, ASIANetwork promotes education about Asia in the liberal arts. We seek to encourage the study of Asian countries and cultures on our campuses and to enable our students and faculty to experience these cultures firsthand. In partnership with external agencies and foundations, including Freeman, Luce and Mellon, we administer numerous programs to improve teaching about Asia, support student-faculty projects, foster collaboration among institutions, and engage in scholarly and pedagogical exchange. ASIANetwork convenes an annual conference that includes faculty panels on research and pedagogy and student research presentations, and we publish the journal *ASIANetwork Exchange* and sponsor a book series with Lever Press/University of Michigan.