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### Bilingual Benefits Revealed in New Studies

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# Bilingual Benefits Revealed in New Studies

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Office of University Communications

March 13, 2014

## *GWU World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Professor Shares Insight*

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. –The increase of international business and the globalization of worldviews, products and ideas have raised the importance of learning a second language, something the Gardner-Webb University World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures knows all about.

“The world has now become a global village,” said Dr. Bernhard Martin, professor of German and chair of the GWU Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures. “Most jobs, whether it be management, education or business include international contacts and even if the main language of the company is English it is important to try and get the outside view of your own culture and connect to these international business partners.”

Martin believes that the language education received during a four-year undergraduate program is enough to work efficiently in a foreign language but it is not until a person learns the culture of the language will they become fluent. “People think that places like McDonald’s in another country is the same as here, but it’s not,” he said. As an example, McDonald’s must adapt to the culture and traditions of another country, instead of the other way around. This includes common English words that might come across as offensive in another countries language. Plus, menu items like burgers made with rice, vegetables, lamb, or even squid elsewhere around the world. “We need to understand other cultures and that is something that we continuously thrive to teach our students.”

While knowing a foreign language in a global economy gives a competitive advantage in the job market, there have also been studies showing psychological benefits. According to new research reported by PsyBlog, an award-winning website about scientific research, when a person is bilingual, there is an increase in brain growth and a person’s learning centers become more susceptible to retaining information. Improved attention and better multitasking abilities are also a benefit of knowing two languages. These cognitive boosts can be caused from having both languages activated at the same time and continually having to monitor which one is appropriate. The positive effects of being bilingual have been proven to be even more important in the developmental stages of a person’s life. Children who are brought up in a bilingual household have shown an improvement in vital skills such as mental calculation and reading as opposed to those raised in a single language household.

On the opposite side of the age spectrum, long-term health benefits can also be seen in older adults. PsyBlog reports that the ability to speak more than one language can help delay the onset of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease later in life. According to a study (the largest of its

kind to date) conducted in India at the Nizam's Institute of Medical Sciences, speaking two languages slowed the onset of three types of dementia, including Alzheimer's, by an average of five years.

“Researchers found that patients who spoke a single language developed the first symptoms of dementia at age 61, versus 65-and-a-half years old in those who were bilingual. Learning a second language is a bit memory-jogging. Language instruction can help older people keep their mental abilities fresh which is important for anyone,” said Martin. “The longer you can be mentally active and use your memory for processing like language learning, it is certainly beneficial.”

Regardless of the reason for studying a foreign language, whether it is for a competitive edge when looking for a job or mental sharpness, Martin believes it is important for everyone to have some basic knowledge of another language in a world that is growing more diverse each day.

–Written by Alyssa Gutierrez, *University Communications Intern*

*Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University provides exceptional educational opportunities within a Christian environment, preparing students to think critically, to succeed professionally, and to serve faithfully as members of their local and global communities.*