No words could describe how happy I was when I first learned that Rutgers Prep—the high school from which I graduated—was offering courses in Arabic language. I made this discovery earlier this year shortly after establishing the first ever degree program in Arab Studies at the University of Houston. It is little surprise that Prep continues to take a leadership role in preparing its graduates for an evolving American academy.

Few American universities have programs in Arab Studies. Others consider it part of a broader discipline known as Middle Eastern Studies. On the one hand Arab Studies is not unlike disciplines that study the classical and modern heritage of ancient civilizations, e.g. Chinese Studies, German Studies, and so on. On the other hand Arab Studies is unique in its potential to inform university students as well as the public consciousness. There is a particular curiosity about the Arab world (and Islamic faith) among the American public today. Much of this curiosity is fed by information—and misinformation—disseminated by the popular media, especially as a result of US involvement in the Middle East and—more recently—in the wake of the popular revolutions that have recently swept through countries like Egypt and Tunisia. Arab Studies provides the nuanced, academic discussion on the Arab world that is needed today. This sophisticated discussion is precisely what makes the university—in the words of Disraeli—“a place of light, liberty and learning.”

The Arab world today is made up of 22 independent nations, many of which are active trading partners with the US. The diversity of the Arab peoples is evident in their different religious and cultural practices, physical appearance and dialects. The Arabic language today is the only widely spoken language expressed formally (Modern Standard Arabic) as well as informally (Colloquial Arabic), which makes learning Arabic particularly challenging for non-native speakers. However, this has not stopped numerous American students from trying—and succeeding—at learning this beautiful language.

The American academy itself is heir to classical Arabic learning. For example, our modern universities and degrees were informed by the institution known as the madrasa as well as the ijaza system. Through Arabic literature the wisdom of the Greeks was preserved. And through Arabic speaking scholars the study of what we call today Philosophy, Mathematics, Sociology, Law and the Liberal Arts flourished. These scholars also named our stars and put numbers on our clocks. The impact of the classical and modern Arab World on our everyday lives is precisely what I believe Arabs Studies should be.

The new Minor in Arab Studies at the University of Houston will be housed at the department of Modern and Classical Languages. The degree will be made up of 18 credit hours, nine hours to be completed in Intermediate and Advanced level Arabic language, and nine hours to be completed in content courses taught in English. These courses allow students to explore a wide range of subjects including: Introduction to Arabic Literature in Translation; Islam and Democracy; and The Modern Middle East: Literature, Politics, and Ideas. Students will also have the opportunity to practice as well as improve their knowledge of Arabic language and culture when they travel overseas to an Arab country.

Establishing the Minor in Arab Studies has two fundamental goals. One goal is to supplement students’ major area of study in order to produce highly trained, bilingual graduates with the necessary skills to compete in an increasingly globalized job market. For example, students interested in careers as diverse as Foreign Affairs, Business and Education will all benefit from the Minor. The Minor will also prepare students who wish to pursue graduate studies in disciplines including Middle Eastern Studies, Religious Studies and Law.

The other goal of the Minor is to produce ‘ambassadors of peace.’ Graduates who have successfully completed the Minor in Arab Studies can foster mutual understanding between the people of the US and the Arab World, especially now when geopolitics has made this dialogue challenging. In this respect Arab Studies is not merely an academic or professional exercise but also a force of good.

Rutgers Prep graduates are ‘prepped’ as global citizens. They receive a rigorous education, which often includes foreign language instruction. Having experience in Arabic—especially at an early stage in their lives—will open many doors for Prep graduates when it comes time to apply to college and later on when they embark on exciting careers. I wish them all the best of luck!