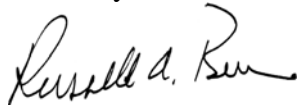


Dear Colleague,

The MLA recently adopted a statement on language learning, and I want to share it with you and your colleagues at the Linguistic Society of America. There has never been a time when the study of languages other than English has been so crucial to our educational priorities, yet the study of languages is threatened on many campuses. Graduate students don't always have the opportunity to pursue advanced fluency in languages that are relevant to their courses of study. Insufficient numbers of specialists in languages can mean an impoverished academic environment for many disciplines.

On behalf of the MLA Executive Council, I request that you issue a statement about the importance of language study as it relates to your discipline. Perhaps our statement can be a guide; you may even wish to endorse it. If you do take action on this matter, as I hope, would you kindly let the MLA know?

Cordially,



Russell A. Berman
President

Learning Another Language: Goals and Challenges

In recent years language programs in the United States have been closed, and the federal government has reduced its support for language education. Because of the fundamental importance of language learning, it is urgent to resist these cutbacks.

It is the obligation of educational institutions to provide all students with opportunities to acquire fluency in a second language. Studying a nonnative language gives students the tools to appreciate other cultures. It enables students to recognize how languages work and to gain a more thoughtful understanding of their native language: by pursuing a second language, students learn how to use their first language with greater precision and purpose. In addition, knowledge of a second language serves students well in the interconnected world: a second language opens the door to job opportunities in the global economy and makes more media accessible, enriching public discussion of current issues. Finally, language knowledge is critical to humanistic inquiry into the cultures and histories of the world.

The Modern Language Association has supported the teaching and study of languages for more than a century. The MLA's 2007 report *Foreign Languages and Higher Education* called for a transformation of university language curricula. In 2009, the MLA issued a survey report on language enrollment, documenting continued increase in student enrollments in college language courses and testifying to strong student interest in all the top ten languages studied in the United States.

Yet despite student demand for language courses and public recognition of the opportunities of globalization, many college language programs have been reduced, closed, or threatened with closure. These actions deny students critical learning opportunities and impoverish their education. Preventing students from participating in college-level language learning does them a profound disservice, diminishes our cultural capacities, and isolates the American public from the conversations of the rest of the world.

The MLA calls for the development of programs to provide every American college graduate with advanced fluency in a nonnative language. American monolingualism is an impediment to effective participation in a multilingual world. More than 80% of Americans are monolingual, while 50% of Europeans over the age of fifteen can carry on a conversation in a second language. The European Union has set the goal of having all students learn two nonnative languages. Other advanced industrial countries, such as Canada, have been able to provide widespread education in more than one language. Enabling all students in the United States to achieve advanced fluency in a second language is a realistic goal, but it will require building strong language programs, beginning in the elementary schools and continuing with higher level learning opportunities in college.

The MLA is prepared to consult with colleges and universities on strategies to strengthen their language programs. We call on higher education leaders to demonstrate creativity in envisioning better language programs that reach ever more students. Instead of shutting language programs, let us keep the door of learning open to the languages and cultures of the world.

Statement adopted by the MLA Executive Council, May 2011

[http://www.mla.org/ec_language_learning]