



# IVORY TOWER OF BABEL

**Rebuilding Language Learning in Higher Education  
for a More Secure and Competitive America**

A PROJECT OF THE  
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI





## AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

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The **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** (ACTA) is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability at America's colleges and universities. Founded in 1995, ACTA works with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the country to support the study of the liberal arts, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus, and ensure that the next generation receives an intellectually rich, high-quality education at an affordable price. Our network consists of alumni and trustees from over **1,300** colleges and universities, including over **23,000** current board members. Our quarterly newsletter, *Inside Academe*, reaches over **15,000** readers.

# Ivory Tower of Babel

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## Rebuilding Language Learning in Higher Education for a More Secure and Competitive America

Language is one of the most universal and diverse forms of expression of human culture, and perhaps even the most essential one. It is at the heart of issues of identity, memory and the transmission of knowledge. . . . Language issues are central to culture. Languages result from a historical and collective experience and express culturally specific worldviews and value systems. . . . Language issues are also central to concepts of education. Linguistic competencies are fundamental for the empowerment of the individual in democratic and plural societies, as they condition school achievement, promote access to other cultures and encourage openness to cultural exchange.<sup>1</sup>

—UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Since 2009, ACTA has advocated for all college students to take a required course in intermediate-level foreign language. Our **What Will They Learn?**<sup>®</sup> project rates the general education programs at over 1,100 liberal arts colleges and universities, evaluating whether they require students to take courses in seven core subject areas, including foreign language. Our **Map of Foreign Language Program Graduates** allows university leaders to identify foreign language programs at nearby institutions so they can join forces to provide a breadth and depth of language offerings.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An old joke goes, “If a person who speaks two languages is bilingual, and a person who speaks three languages is trilingual, what do you call a person who speaks one language? . . . An American.” Almost 80% of Americans speak only English; by contrast, just 25% of adults in the European Union are monolingual.<sup>2</sup> The people of the United States can get away with it because they speak the most common language in the world: 1.1 billion of the 1.5 billion English speakers worldwide have learned English as a second language.<sup>3</sup> American college graduates should match this level of education by knowing how to communicate in at least one language other than English.

It is a dubious distinction that American society, which sets cultural standards for much of the world, stands out for its monolingualism. “For the first time in over a thousand years,” historian Jacques Barzun said in 2000, the “educated class is not expected to be at least bilingual.”<sup>4</sup> Yet never have Americans received so many college degrees.

It did not use to be so. As Appendix A of this report shows, foreign language study was emphasized in American higher education from the beginning. The first Americans imbued the pursuit of wisdom and scientific knowledge with a pragmatic spirit that included proficiency in foreign tongues. In the colonial period, colleges required all students to read ancient-language texts in accordance with the Renaissance humanist and Protestant Reformation traditions. The Founders recognized the basic need for language study, while espousing varied views of how best to implement it. James Madison, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson read widely in Greek and Latin to educate themselves in statecraft and science, while Benjamin Franklin favored modern languages alone. Franklin’s preference continues today in the popularity of Spanish or Chinese over ancient languages. Moreover, since the War of Independence, statesmen’s command of foreign languages has continuously proven vital to American foreign affairs, from our first diplomats negotiating France’s support of the Revolution to critical-need language training in the Second World War, the Cold War, and the War on Terror.

Today, the many benefits Americans would derive from deeper language education include:

- Citizens with foreign language proficiency provide essential information for the U.S. intelligence service, military, and diplomatic corps. Despite this need, a 2020 report by the Council on Foreign Relations showed that 15% of language-designated positions overseas are vacant, and 24% are filled by officers with insufficient language training.
- Job postings for multilingual employees offer 19% more compensation than job postings for monolingual employees; Indeed.com lists “translation” as the fifth most in-demand job skill; and one out of four U.S. employers reports losing business because of lack of language skills on staff.
- Cognitive science research shows that learning another language improves the ability to comprehend other perspectives, tolerate ambiguity, and understand cultures different from one’s own.
- Language learning sharpens executive function and logical decision-making, improves test performance, and enhances creative thinking. Some studies suggest that language learning can slow the progress of dementia.

In spite of these benefits, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni's (ACTA) research shows that language study at U.S. colleges and universities is in trouble, even as “global competence” and “diversity” have become key objectives at many institutions.

- Language enrollments have declined 59% over 51 years and dropped 17% from 2016 to 2021 alone.
- In 2011, the federal government cut 40% of the Department of Education's international programs and language studies budgets, and the situation is much worse as of 2025.
- Language departments are usually the first to suffer in a college's financial bind. Six out of seven Ohio schools issuing academic cuts in 2024 downsized or eliminated language programs. West Virginia University eliminated all world languages majors and graduate programs in 2023.
- Only 11% of institutions require foreign language study at an intermediate or higher level.
- College-level language preparation is particularly important, given that only 11 states have foreign language high school graduation requirements.

Despite this dark picture, leaders in academia have options, which we outline in this report:

- When universities eliminate departments or majors, they often direct those students to a partner institution. Universities can plan out this option, instead of using it as a last-ditch effort, by joining consortia, course-sharing, and other partnerships to expand language learning offerings while reducing costs.
- ACTA has built a Map of Foreign Language Program Graduates showing opportunities for course-sharing and program-sharing among universities.
- Narrowing the number of qualifying courses in general education programs, which often reaches or surpasses 1,000 offerings, would improve university budgets and language course enrollment.
- Colleges may require at least **intermediate-level language formation** in their general education programs, the minimum for meaningful exchanges between people.
- Institutions that have a global competency requirement or have started a new Western Civilization program may be persuaded to include language study in the curriculum.
- Institutions with budgetary concerns may explore funding from the federal government and private foundations.
- Schools that assess all language students with objective external measures such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language's (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview, which draws upon standards set by the Department of Defense, give their students a competitive advantage in the job market.

The personal, cognitive, and professional benefits to individual students, not to mention the benefits to our nation, should compel colleges and universities to restore foreign language study to its former place at the center of the curriculum. ACTA urges universities to defend the value and practicability of language education for a free society. Universities claiming to be liberal arts institutions must offer robust language programs to benefit campus and country.

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# 1.

## WHY LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TODAY?

What is the value of learning a foreign language in the classroom when an app seems like it can teach just as well? Why learn a second language at all when with a smart device we can obtain an instant translation to and from our native language courtesy of artificial intelligence? The classroom difference is in the human touch, providing cultural context and nuance necessary for business, industry, and diplomacy. These are the very factors that make learning a language oneself so valuable. Language learning is not just memorization of grammar, vocabulary, and their rudimentary practical applications. It initiates the student into a culture, history, and people. And learning languages can bring financial, intercultural, and cognitive gains that not only benefit the individual learner, but also society and the nation at large.

### Benefits to the Nation

Multilingual societies have long been more effective in trade or international business, and their ability to analyze perspectives and tolerate ambiguity encourages an outgoing and entrepreneurial spirit. As the World Economic Forum reports, Switzerland attributes 10% of its annual GDP to its multilingual status, while the United Kingdom may be losing the equivalent of 3.5% of its GDP due to de-emphasizing multilingualism.<sup>5</sup>

The population of the United States has never been more linguistically diverse, with some 350 languages spoken by more bi- or multilingual people than ever before. In recent decades, the number of people who have spoken a language other than English at home has grown at a faster rate than the United States' overall population. Between 1980 and 2019, it nearly tripled, from 23.1 million to 67.8 million, an increase of 194%, while the overall United States population grew by 47% in the same period.<sup>6</sup> As of 2019, at least 28% of the population five years and older spoke a language other than English at home in Democrat and Republican strongholds in California, New York, Texas, and Florida.<sup>7</sup> Many, though not most, of these people have limited English knowledge. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and Executive Order 13166, issued in the year 2000, require places that receive federal funding to provide oral or written translations of all communications in the native language of those who speak limited English. In essential settings such as hospitals, courts, and schools, then, bilingual workers fulfill a civic duty, bridging the gap between English speakers and non-English speakers and strengthening America's social fabric.

The U.S. federal government has long seen foreign language education as vital to national security and America's global status. (Appendix A narrates America's history of foreign language instruction.) Language and culture education in the universities and foreign exchange programs have received heavy government investments ever since the mid-twentieth century. The Interagency Language Roundtable, founded in 1955 to coordinate language knowledge-building across the federal government, sets language proficiency standards. Building on the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the Higher Education Act of 1965 established federal programs such as Language Resource Centers and National Resource Centers to support language

learning at universities nationwide. As the following passage from the 1965 Higher Education Act describes, the government supports language education to shore up national security and diplomatic relations:

1. The security, stability, and economic vitality of the United States in a complex global era depend upon American experts in and citizens knowledgeable about world regions, foreign languages, and international affairs, as well as upon a strong research base in these areas.
2. Advances in communications technology and the growth of regional and global problems make knowledge of other countries and the ability to communicate in other languages more essential to the promotion of mutual understanding and cooperation among nations and their peoples.
3. Dramatic changes in the world's geopolitical and economic landscapes are creating needs for American expertise and knowledge about a greater diversity of less commonly taught foreign languages and nations of the world.<sup>8</sup>

The State Department administers many fellowships that train Americans in foreign languages and cultures, for instance, the Fulbright-Hays Program, awarded to several thousand U.S. researchers, teachers, and artists annually to equip them to act abroad as “cultural ambassadors” for the United States.<sup>9</sup>

The United States government emphasizes language proficiency in hiring practices. In the intelligence agencies, the military, and the diplomatic corps, employees trained in “strategic” or “critical” languages are mission-essential. Yet despite prioritizing “critical languages” such as Dari, Farsi, and Arabic in recruitment and training since September 11, 2001, the military lacks U.S. nationals who can operate in these languages proficiently. This vacuum of expertise may have contributed to military defeat, especially in the “irregular conflict” of recent military actions, where building cultural capital is vital.<sup>10</sup> A 2020 report by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) identified a number of language deficiencies at the State Department: “Language-designated positions overseas are 15 percent vacant, and 24 percent of those staffed are filled by officers who do not meet the minimum language requirement.”<sup>11</sup> In response, CFR recommended prioritizing language skills when recruiting and training foreign service officers. It also recommended removing security restrictions on assigning heritage speakers to their countries of origin, but to do so would introduce national security risks. A better solution for diplomacy *and* security is to continue training more U.S. citizens in other languages.

Well-devised foreign policy requires leaders who know local cultures and languages intimately. This is what made the diplomatic efforts of the American colonies and later fledgling nation in France (as discussed in Appendix A) so successful. In the first decades of the Republic, John Quincy Adams acquired as a diplomat in Berlin a wealth of German cultural materials, especially literature and political works that he translated into English. The future president was able to contribute a deep familiarity with German language and civilization to America's own self-fashioning, by proposing an alternative cultural influence to Britain or France at a critical period in history.<sup>12</sup> During the Cold War, best-selling novel *The Ugly American* admonished our nation that there would be dire consequences for United States foreign affairs due to linguistic and cultural ignorance abroad. Those warnings are every bit as relevant today.

In diplomacy, linguistic half-measures have caused America to lose opportunities to its rivals. In one such instance, an American public health delegation was brushed off by an African delegation from an unnamed country, given only a 30-minute meeting, in part because its interpreters only spoke French, not the local African language. By contrast, the Chinese delegation, which knew the local language as well as French, received a three-hour audience.<sup>13</sup>

## Professional Benefits

Knowing more than one language gives job-seekers a competitive advantage in the global marketplace, through which they can obtain family-sustaining jobs. From 2010 to 2015, demand for bilingual and multilingual employees more than doubled, and bilingual remote job postings on one job search site increased by 30% from 2020 to 2022.<sup>14</sup> American business leaders prize bilingual or multilingual staff for their ability to strengthen

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client relationships and expand operations, both in the United States and abroad. In fact, in one 2018 survey, nine out of ten American employers of all sizes reported relying on U.S.-based employees who knew languages other than English in their business operations.<sup>15</sup> One-third (32%) reported a high degree of reliance on them. Fifty-six percent of employers stated that their need for foreign language skills would

increase over the next five years—and the recent increase in immigration certainly has borne out that concern.<sup>16</sup> As of January 2025, Indeed.com lists translation, including linguistic *and* intercultural competency, as fifth among the top 20 in-demand skills in today's working world.<sup>17</sup> Because the federal government mandates many workplaces to hire language-enabled professionals, there are a number of job opportunities for proficient interpreters and translators in federally funded settings like courts, hospitals, and schools.

The value of communicating with foreign language-speaking clients and partners stems not so much from conveying information with technical precision (this a computer might be able to do), but from doing so with human nuance. Employers acknowledge that staff with foreign language abilities not only retain and grow business but enrich the workplace with intercultural understanding and diversity. And by contrast, not having linguistically qualified staff can affect the bottom line: One out of four U.S. employers claims to have lost business due to a lack of language skills on staff.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, according to one study, American businesses lose more than \$2 billion annually from linguistic or cultural misunderstandings.<sup>19</sup> Because of this, business leaders value language skills enough to prioritize hiring and compensating people who have them. According to a 2023 survey, 42% of multilingual employees reported receiving a raise in the last year, which is about 5% more than single-language speakers; and job offerings indicated that multilinguals would earn around 19% more than monolinguals, on average.<sup>20</sup>

## Benefits to Campus and Society: Diversity Done Right

The best language teaching intentionally prioritizes developing learners into conscientious citizens. American universities' first duty is to impart knowledge and, above all, wisdom to students. As part of that mission, many universities have chosen to include global and multicultural education in recent years, even requiring "global competency" or "intercultural competency" for graduation.<sup>21</sup> The American Association of Colleges & Universities supports higher education institutions that encourage "global learning," in which students "become informed, open-minded, and responsible people who are attentive to diversity across the spectrum of differences."<sup>22</sup>

Diversity programs, of the previously conventional sort that are currently undergoing rapid transformation or elimination, are less effective than incorporating the values of global learning into the concrete study of language. In reality, a durable understanding of other peoples comes only through in-depth, rigorous study. Today's language courses, which teach language alongside cultural content, help students engage diverse peoples with intellectual rigor, empathy, and ultimately, the civic-mindedness that "diversity done right" should seek to cultivate. From Renaissance humanism to the immersion-only Berlitz Method, comprehensive language learning has consistently contemplated knowledge of the target language's culture as a central aim. More recent language pedagogy has christened and nurtured this as "intercultural competence." While there is not a definitive link between multilingualism and overall emotional intelligence, it has been shown that learning another language imbues students with greater intercultural knowledge and perspective-taking ability.<sup>23</sup> This cultural knowledge, in turn, gives the learner a greater ability to thrive among more places and people worldwide, known as "global competence."<sup>24</sup>

Note that it is not just bilingualism but the very act of language *learning* that causes students to shift their ways of thinking as they begin to participate in a broader community. Gaining understanding of a new language expands the learner's mind. It makes him engage in "translation" to and from not just the language but also the culture he is studying and his own:

It involves noticing, analyzing, and reflecting on differences in and through languages and the exploration of ways to transfer meanings from one language to another. [Second language] learning is thus seen as akin to an exercise in 'cultural translation'; that is, an ability to understand another culture in its own terms.<sup>25</sup>

Students also gain a more positive attitude toward those who speak the language they are learning even within their native country.<sup>26</sup> A French instructor at Kennesaw State University found that her students honed the ability to understand and relate to Francophone society as well as an overall awareness of and ability to evaluate cultures, even their own.<sup>27</sup>

Knowing more than one language cultivates an overall open-mindedness. Bilingual students show greater ability to acknowledge and take on others' perspective *in general* than monolinguals, and it appears to be true that bilingualism particularly enhances that ability in men.<sup>28</sup> Multilingualism and language proficiency are

positively correlated with the personality trait psychologists call “tolerance of ambiguity,” a comfort with the unfamiliar.<sup>29</sup> This trait became a prominent subject of discussion in the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but having such a characteristic benefits society in any period. It makes one more open to risk-taking, entrepreneurship, and a range of social situations.

## Cognitive Benefits

In recent decades, cognitive science research has generally supported the idea that learning more than one language benefits people’s cognitive function in a variety of areas. The “bilingual advantage theory,” supported by a number of studies, posits that when bilinguals or multilinguals constantly suppress one language in favor of another, they are building stronger executive function, the most complex of brain functions, which has implications far beyond foreign language processing. Learning just one second language can provide this advantage, and some research has indicated that benefits could multiply with multiple languages.<sup>30</sup> Bilinguals have greater executive function than monolinguals in several key ways. They can switch between tasks more quickly and seamlessly.<sup>31</sup> They also can filter out unnecessary information to achieve daily tasks more easily than monolinguals (a skill known as inhibitory or attentional control, depending on its application).<sup>32</sup> Because some studies that assign tasks to rate cognitive function have shown more limited benefits, some scientists have taken to neuroanatomical imaging to map out the brain function of multilinguals. FMRI shows that bilinguals’ brain stems respond more consistently to auditory stimuli.<sup>33</sup> Neuroimaging has also indicated that people who speak at least two languages retain a greater amount of gray matter than those who speak one language. The increased gray matter does not appear in those who can communicate in both American Sign Language and English, indicating that using multiple languages simultaneously does not produce this advantage.<sup>34</sup>

The cognitive benefits of second language acquisition extend to the realm of decision-making. When presented with a choice in their non-native language, people tend to think more logically than they would in their native language. In fact, they are more likely to make decisions based squarely on the information in front of them, without regard to the way in which someone else frames that information. They are also less motivated by the fear of loss, known to psychologists and behavioral economists as loss aversion.<sup>35</sup>

Learning another language can strengthen thought processes in the native language, even for adult beginners.<sup>36</sup> Because of this, students with foreign language training have shown greater academic achievement in diverse subjects than those without such training, when measured by GPA or by aptitude or knowledge test scores.<sup>37</sup> In one study, middle schoolers who received training from a Latin specialist for 30 minutes per day over five months scored significantly higher in subjects ranging from math concepts to language to science than those who did not receive this training.<sup>38</sup> Finally, various studies have borne out that foreign language skills enhance creative thinking, which so many college curricula consider a learning objective in itself.<sup>39</sup>

Multilinguals’ standardized aptitude test results have proven stronger than those of monolinguals. The College Board’s annual breakdown of SAT performance consistently indicates that native speakers of both English and another language score higher on their SATs than native speakers of English alone.<sup>40</sup> Test-takers who speak more than one language perform better than monolinguals *regardless of fluency*, according to one study.<sup>41</sup> Some

research shows that adult learners can achieve native-like brain function in a non-native language, especially when they learn through immersion, the process by which we learn our native language.<sup>42</sup>

Learning other languages also improves a student's cognitive reserve later in life. On average, bilinguals with diseases such as Alzheimer's will see a delay in the onset of dementia symptoms by as many as five years.<sup>43</sup>

Generally, the earlier and more thoroughly one learns a second language, the greater the effect. Yet according to a new subfield of bilingualism and aging, language learning even late in life can have positive cognitive effects.<sup>44</sup> Multilingualism can also improve both mental fluency and affect in advanced age, especially when coupled with musical experience.<sup>45</sup> As the world population lives ever longer, these improvements in quality of life in old age are even more important.

## 2.

### DECLINING FOREIGN LANGUAGE INVESTMENT IN ACADEMIA

Even with a national security and diplomatic need for foreign language study and an increasingly multilingual society, the American educational system, K–16, has become ambivalent about foreign language study. This can be seen most clearly in what schools and colleges require all students to learn. The United States is “the only industrialized country where language study is, for the most part, optional rather than mandatory.” Foreign language is required for all graduating K–12 students in just 11 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia; by contrast, 20 of the most industrialized nations require that all primary or secondary students learn *at least* one world language.<sup>46</sup>

As of 2010, under 51% of nonprofit colleges and universities surveyed by the Modern Language Association (MLA) had any language requirement for graduation.<sup>47</sup> ACTA data indicate that as of 2025, only 11% of U.S. four-year liberal arts undergraduate institutions require intermediate-level foreign language proficiency, a decrease from 13% in 2013.<sup>48</sup> Significantly, it is much more common for America’s most elite schools to have this requirement: six out of eight Ivy League universities (75%) compared to just 15 of the 50 state flagship universities (30%).<sup>49</sup> This raises the concern expressed by one history professor: “we run the risk in America of only the wealthiest, attending the wealthiest colleges, having access to liberal education while our own senatorial class—most graduates of elite institutions—tell the rest of us to choose a more practical major.”<sup>50</sup> The statistics indicate that strong language formation is becoming increasingly exclusive to high-prestige colleges and universities.

#### Foreign Language Programs Out, Global Competency In

Despite the massive growth in the American population who speak foreign languages over the last few decades, America’s colleges and universities have been cutting languages as a quick solution to budget woes, while ironically proclaiming allegiance to diversity and global competency. The most recent comprehensive survey

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of cuts to humanities degree programs, conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, found that while colleges cut 6% of degree programs overall between 2007 and 2013, they cut 12% of foreign language degree programs.<sup>51</sup> As early as 2019, the MLA sounded the alarm about colleges cutting languages in economic crises: It discovered that between 2009 and 2013, only one college language program

closed, but from 2013 to 2016, 651 closed.<sup>52</sup> As of 2024, ACTA found that 41 (82%) out of the 50 state flagship universities have some kind of global competency or diversity course requirement, while just 15

(30%) require intermediate language.<sup>53</sup> As colleges provide fewer language offerings, fewer students enroll than ever before, generating a strange “linguistic divide” between the nation’s often-bilingual immigrant population, who are expected to assimilate and learn English fluently, and its college graduates, who should have received a liberal arts education including language study.<sup>54</sup>

## Declining Enrollments

Among higher education language professionals, low enrollment is the most common concern, followed by lack of institutional or administrative support, a decrease in language requirements or restrictive curricula, staffing issues, and funding issues.<sup>55</sup> According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, enrollments in college language courses decreased 59% over the 51 years since the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965. In that year, there were 17.5 language course enrollments for every 100 college students enrolled nationwide; by 2016, that number dropped to 7.1.<sup>56</sup> Total language enrollments then dropped by another 17% between 2016 and 2021, the largest decrease since the earliest year the MLA collected data in 1958.<sup>57</sup> The decline includes not just traditional languages like French, Spanish, and Ancient Greek, but also most languages that the federal government designates as “critical need” for national security and diplomacy, such as Chinese, Arabic, and Russian. (The only clear exception to this downward trend, outside of American Sign Language, is Korean, with a 38% increase between 2016 and 2021, normally attributed to the recent popularity of Korean culture.<sup>58</sup>) Total foreign language course enrollments in America peaked near 2009, and even then, a smaller percentage of the total college student population was enrolled in language programs than in 1958.<sup>59</sup>

## Financial Woes in Academia

Many colleges nationwide are facing a financial crisis in recent years due to a range of factors, including declining enrollments (down 15% since 2010), the looming “demographic cliff,” a suffering economy, and growing skepticism about the value of a college degree.<sup>60</sup> In a time of belt-tightening, colleges lack the confidence to justify investing in programs with lower student-to-faculty ratios, which effective language courses typically have.

In 2011, the federal government cut 40% of the Department of Education’s international programs and language studies budget, and the situation is even worse as of 2025.<sup>61</sup> In 2024, the Department of Defense did not renew grants for 13 of 31 Language Flagship programs nationwide, which help students at public universities to achieve professional proficiency in critical-need languages, even funding study abroad. Surprisingly, most of the programs cut were in Russian and Chinese, despite Russia’s war with Ukraine and threats of conflict with China.<sup>62</sup> As of 2025, the Department of Education has apparently eliminated all staff supporting International and Foreign Language Education programs.<sup>63</sup> State-level funding for higher education has also decreased over the last few recessions.<sup>64</sup>

As colleges make cuts to academic staff or program budgets, language programs and faculty are the first to go. For example, in 2023, R1 flagship school West Virginia University gutted 28 academic programs and fired 143 faculty.<sup>65</sup> All world languages and linguistics were initially terminated, though some language minors returned after campus and nationwide furor.<sup>66</sup> The low student-to-faculty ratios, which colleges typically highlight

in their admissions materials, counted against academic programs in this process.<sup>67</sup> A study of all Ohio colleges and universities reporting academic cuts in 2024 revealed a similar pattern: Six out of seven cut languages. At three of these, languages or related area studies were the only humanities or social science programs eliminated or merged.<sup>68</sup> Wright State University made explicit its priority: to eliminate programs without “significant demand and relevance in today’s job market.”<sup>69</sup> The University of Toledo stated that its academic cuts were largely based on “student and workforce demand, program viability, accreditation requirements, general education requirements, and potential to deliver the program as a minor or certificate.”<sup>70</sup> It is important that colleges consider general education requirements when determining academic program relevance. Nonetheless, for none of these reasons should language programs, core liberal arts programs with real professional benefits, be removed. Nor should the salary premium for graduates with foreign language skills be ignored.

### **Strategies to Prevent Core Academic Cuts**

Some schools facing budget troubles have found ways to forestall program closure by consolidating academic programs and cutting non-academic positions. (These are solutions that ACTA supports, as can be seen in the “Solutions” section of this report.) Miami University is reportedly consolidating language majors within a “World Languages and Culture” degree.<sup>71</sup> The University of Connecticut elected to keep all undergraduate programs, including languages; its holistic assessment considered not only enrollment numbers and the job market but also “completion trends” and, importantly, “academic quality and student outcomes.”<sup>72</sup> For now, this Carnegie R1 research university has prioritized liberal arts, including foreign languages, for its undergraduates.

### 3.

## SOLUTIONS

In 2025, universities faced their most serious budgetary challenges in decades, making expensive language programs even more tempting to eliminate. Yet for reasons of academic rigor, national security, societal and campus cohesion, and student professional and cognitive outcomes, universities must invest in robust language instruction. To ensure that their graduates can engage in adult discourse in a foreign language, schools must offer at least intermediate-level language study, preferably more.<sup>73</sup> This section will offer academic leaders possible solutions for implementing a robust, measurable, intermediate-level requirement in foreign language. These recommendations cover external funding sources; state and local support for K–12 language instruction; consortia, course-sharing, and program consolidation; implementing intermediate-level requirements; and curricular and campus innovations to enhance student learning and outcomes. Committing to a strong language requirement, as part of a broader recommitment to the liberal arts, can rejuvenate students' and the American public's passion and respect for collegiate learning.

### External Funding Sources

External funding of language programs provides opportunities for students from a wide array of financial backgrounds to achieve linguistic and cultural proficiency, without putting as much financial pressure on universities themselves. Such support keeps enrollments and language offerings robust, as students have stronger incentives to study a language in depth. Although the future level of federal funding is unclear, the federal government is currently the largest funder of college language programs, providing a range of opportunities, particularly through the Departments of Education, State, and Defense. Department of Education grants for International and Foreign Language Education provide important support to language departments and learners.<sup>74</sup> Established by Title VI of the 1965 Higher Education Act, Language Resource Centers (LRCs) aim to strengthen language teaching and learning, especially of less commonly taught or strategic languages, and currently operate at 16 research universities nationwide. Most LRCs offer training and resources for language instructors and individual learners, and a few offer language courses (California State University–Fullerton's LRC provides online Vietnamese, and Indiana University–Bloomington's LRC offers Dari, Pashto, and Uyghur). Michigan State University's LRC is seeking partner institutions to share courses in less commonly taught languages.<sup>75</sup> Title VI further established National Resource Centers (NRCs), which incorporate language studies into area studies centers at universities for a broader international relations purpose. Several of the language consortia listed in this report belong to National Resource Centers.

Due to recent changes in federal administrative priorities, the future of Title VI and the centers it supports is uncertain. Critics over the years have identified growing politicization within NRCs and LRCs that has distracted from the foreign language instruction essential to cultural understanding and sensitivity.<sup>76</sup> Congress would do well to put up curricular guardrails to ensure that language instruction, not ideology, is the focus of these programs, as they are intended to train diplomats and businesspeople, not to indoctrinate activists. Once Congress does this, it must continue the government's historically robust support of foreign language

teaching and learning in higher education that is essential for national security and civic interests. Universities could consider recruiting students, educators, and alumni for cultural and linguistic exchange programs abroad through the Fulbright and Fulbright-Hays Programs. Historically offered through the State and Education Departments, the Fulbright Programs emphasize diplomacy over political concerns and support students, alumni, and professionals for short-term and year-long cultural and linguistic exchanges.<sup>77</sup>

Public universities that offer or would consider offering strategic languages have another option in the Language Flagship program, located at a range of public institutions nationwide. Through this program, the Department of Defense provides funding for undergraduate students to gain professional proficiency in critical-need strategic languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Russian. Language Flagships support on-campus professional networking and cultural activities, intensive summer programs, a capstone year abroad, and more.<sup>78</sup> According to one 2018 report, none of the Language Flagship universities has suffered from a drop in enrollment. Since the University of North Georgia was named as a Language Flagship, it saw substantial gains in *all* languages, and as of early 2025, it offers majors and minors in Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish, with optional concentrations in Business, Global Professionals, or Language & Literature, as well as minors in Italian, Japanese, and Korean.<sup>79</sup>

Beyond federal support, it is worth noting that some private funding for college language education exists. In recent years, the Mellon Foundation has accorded grants to language programs in consortia and at individual colleges, for instance, through the Modern Language Association's "MLA Pathways: Recruitment, Retention, and Career Readiness" initiative. When coupled with interdisciplinary study, global studies, or civic engagement focuses, language programs may open up funding opportunities from other sources such as the Carnegie or Spencer Foundations.

## State and Local Support for K–12 Language Instruction

Students would be able to study intermediate-to-advanced language in less time at the college level if their primary and secondary language foundations were more rigorous. At the state and local levels, citizens, legislators, and school boards could advocate for improving states' K–12 requirements and standards for foreign language. The K–12 years are particularly important to consider for language study because the "critical period" of language learning ends around the ages of 17–18. In fact, a recent study indicates that native-like fluency may possibly only be achieved if language exposure occurs before the age of 10.<sup>80</sup> Yet states report that only about 20% of the total school-age population are enrolled in language classes, and as reported above on page 10, only 11 states have foreign language graduation requirements.<sup>81</sup>

## Consortia, Course-Sharing, and Program Consolidation

Given the fundamental importance of language offerings to a liberal arts education, colleges or universities should consider every alternative to program closure, such as consortia or consolidation. To expand language offerings, many universities have turned to language consortia, which pool resources among various institutions. This may result in improved enrollments, cost savings, and increased institutional cachet. Many, though not all, consortium courses take advantage of videoconferencing or online learning platforms to facilitate collaboration

**TABLE 1: SELECT LANGUAGE CONSORTIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Consortium Name and Website	Consortium Type	Participating Institutions	Language Focus/Purpose
Association of Independent Colleges & Universities of Rhode Island's Language Consortium Program: <a href="https://aicuri.org/initiatives/academic/">https://aicuri.org/initiatives/academic/</a>	Statewide; online-only	Colleges and universities in Rhode Island; private	Expanding options beyond home institution
Big Ten Academic Alliance CourseShare Program: <a href="https://btaa.org/resources-for/students/shared-courses">https://btaa.org/resources-for/students/shared-courses</a>	Nationwide; online-only	Over a dozen large research universities; mostly public, some private	Offering less commonly taught languages (Akan, Sumerian, Ukrainian)
Consortium for the Teaching of Hebrew Language and Culture: <a href="https://www.brandeis.edu/hebrew-consortium/index.html">https://www.brandeis.edu/hebrew-consortium/index.html</a>	International; hybrid (in-person and online, synchronous and asynchronous)	Mix of public and private institutions: Brandeis University, Middlebury College, Queens College, and Universidad Hebraica (Mexico)	Training educators and students of Hebrew and providing them with resources such as workshops, asynchronous classes, working groups, and fellowships
Five College Center for World Languages: <a href="https://www.fivecolleges.edu/languages">https://www.fivecolleges.edu/languages</a>	Local; in-person	Four private liberal arts colleges in Massachusetts and the public, research-focused University of Massachusetts–Amherst	Expanding options beyond home institution; offering less commonly taught languages
Indigenous and Diasporic Language Consortium: <a href="https://as.nyu.edu/research-centers/clacs/languages/indigenous-and-diasporic-language-consortium.html">https://as.nyu.edu/research-centers/clacs/languages/indigenous-and-diasporic-language-consortium.html</a>	Local; in-person	Three universities in New York City: Columbia University, CUNY–Lehman College, and New York University; two private, one public	Promoting study of indigenous and diasporic languages of the Americas (Haitian Creole, Mixteco, Nahuatl, Quechua)
North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies/The Consortium in Latin American and Caribbean Studies: <a href="https://ncmideast.org/">https://ncmideast.org/</a> ; <a href="https://lacsconsortium.org/">https://lacsconsortium.org/</a>	Local; in-person and online	Duke University and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill	Facilitating less commonly taught regional language learning as part of area studies (Yucatec Maya)
Shared Course Initiative: <a href="https://sharedcourseinitiative.lrc.columbia.edu/">https://sharedcourseinitiative.lrc.columbia.edu/</a>	Regional; hybrid (synchronous, remote)	Three Ivy-League schools: Columbia University, Cornell University, and Yale University	Offering dozens of less commonly taught languages, with a focus on community building
SUNY Comprehensive Colleges Language Consortium: <a href="https://online.suny.edu/languagesconsortium">https://online.suny.edu/languagesconsortium</a>	Statewide public system; online-only	State University of New York (SUNY) campuses	Expanding options beyond home institution; offering common or somewhat common languages (American Sign Language, Chinese, Hebrew, Spanish)
UF-CLAS Shared Language Program: <a href="https://clas.ufl.edu/shared-language-program/">https://clas.ufl.edu/shared-language-program/</a>	Statewide public system; online-only (synchronous and asynchronous)	Institutions in the State University System or the Florida College System	Expanding options beyond home institution; offering beginner classes in less commonly taught languages (Akan, Hungarian, Turkish)
UNC Language Exchange: <a href="https://www.northcarolina.edu/offices-and-services/digital-learning/language-exchange">https://www.northcarolina.edu/offices-and-services/digital-learning/language-exchange</a>	Statewide public system; hybrid (in-person and videoconference)	Public campuses in North Carolina	Expanding options beyond home institution; offering both more and less commonly taught languages at advanced levels

nationwide. A wide range of institutions, from regional public colleges in a state system to Ivy Leagues and well-established liberal arts colleges, have joined consortia, as listed in the table on the previous page. These programs provide options ranging from introductory Spanish to advanced ancient languages to critical-need languages to indigenous languages. Colleges can build a consortium according to their needs and priorities. Consolidation or pooling of programs across institutions does bring its own challenges, such as reliance on technology, logistics of cost-sharing and cross-registration, and a need to promote or list external course offerings. Not every consortium has survived over the years due to these challenges, but those schools that have prioritized investing in strong academics have thrived.

A more permanent method of preserving a language program in some form is longer-term program consolidation or mergers. When departments or majors are shuttered, universities often direct those students to complete their studies through or at a partner institution—but why can universities not proactively consider this option, instead of a last-ditch effort *in extremis*? Even without a formal consortium among local schools, colleges whose language programs are at risk can find other local institutions with academic programs that complement their own. ACTA’s interactive Map of Foreign Language Program Graduates, linked in note 82, allows administrators and trustees to see which language degree programs have few graduates and which nearby schools offer similar programs.<sup>82</sup> With this knowledge, schools can merge their programs with nearby institutions instead of closing them down entirely.

## Implementing Intermediate-Level Requirements

ACTA specifically recommends that colleges insist on excellence by requiring at least intermediate-level proficiency of all arts and sciences students. A student’s language skill level is one of the most objectively measurable outcomes of humanistic studies, with several internationally recognized standards. Objective standards for language proficiency provide a model of academic accountability for other liberal art disciplines,

Objective standards for language proficiency provide a model of academic accountability for other liberal art disciplines, and language programs could apply a nationally or internationally standardized evaluation of language outcomes to ensure that students ultimately acquire at least intermediate-level knowledge.

and language programs could apply a nationally or internationally standardized evaluation of language outcomes to ensure that students ultimately acquire at least intermediate-level knowledge.<sup>83</sup> Academic administration could reasonably require language departments to administer the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview, which was originally based on a Department of Defense exam, or an equivalent national or international exam.

Examples and data show that an intermediate-level language requirement

correlates with overall higher language program success. If undergraduates have all achieved intermediate-level proficiency, many will pursue advanced study, and the numbers of total program enrollments and graduates

will increase. The University of Oklahoma has experienced language enrollment declines significantly below the national average, which the MLA attributes primarily to administrative support in maintaining a three-semester language requirement.<sup>84</sup> Of the institutions in the Big Ten Academic Alliance, a consortium supporting advanced and broad language study, 50% (nine out of 18) require intermediate-level study.<sup>85</sup>

ACTA’s research supports these examples, indicating that intermediate-level foreign language requirements may boost language majors and the number of total undergraduate students enrolled in language courses. Compared to the nationwide average, a larger proportion of the 20 schools with the top percentages of majors in “foreign language and literature” require intermediate-level foreign language (six schools, or 30%).<sup>86</sup> The higher the language requirement, the higher the percentage of students enrolled in all levels of languages. As shown in Table 2 below, on average, schools with intermediate-level language requirements for all undergraduates have the highest percentage of undergraduates enrolled in language courses at all levels (22%), followed by those with elementary-level requirements (12%) and those with no language requirement (9%).

**TABLE 2: TOTAL PERCENTAGE OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN COURSES BY COLLEGE LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT LEVEL**

Language Requirement Level	Total Language Enrollment as a Percentage of Undergraduate Student Body
Intermediate	22%
Elementary	12%
No Requirement	9%

Sources: College language requirement levels derived from ACTA’s survey of core curricula, *What Will They Learn?*<sup>®</sup>: “Explore Schools,” *What Will They Learn?*<sup>®</sup>, American Council of Trustees and Alumni, <https://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/schools/compare?subject=ForeignLanguage>. Language enrollment data derived from the MLA’s survey data: *Language Enrollment Database, 1958–2021*, Modern Language Association, 2025, [https://apps.mla.org/flsurvey\\_search](https://apps.mla.org/flsurvey_search), which can be downloaded at <https://www.mla.org/content/download/191323/file/Historical-language-enrollments-1958-2021.xlsx>.

Integration into the university’s academic requirements also seems to protect language departments during budget cuts. The University of Toledo explicitly stated that “general education requirements” were one of the major factors in choosing which programs to eliminate or reduce.<sup>87</sup> The University of Connecticut’s intermediate language requirement may have helped prevent language program cuts amid a 2024 budgetary crisis.<sup>88</sup>

Universities with sufficient demand and financial wherewithal can attract students to foreign language programs by offering a range of languages, levels, and focuses. (Schools with a smaller student population or budget can seek the same outcome by forming consortia, as discussed on page 14.) As discussed previously (see

page 10), elite higher education institutions offer the broadest range of language types and levels and require intermediate-level study at a much higher rate than the nationwide average (Seventy-five percent of Ivies require such study, compared to 30% of state flagships and 11% of schools nationwide.)<sup>89</sup> All Ivy League universities, regardless of size or requirement, offer at least a dozen languages, often including less commonly taught languages. Columbia University students, with the additional resources of two language consortia, can choose from nearly 50 languages.<sup>90</sup>

After Ivy League schools, ACTA's research has found that state flagships, private research universities, and liberal arts colleges provide the most intermediate-to-advanced language education programs.<sup>91</sup> They also participate in government language programs and form language consortia at a higher frequency than other schools.<sup>92</sup> Eighteen percent of liberal arts colleges and universities evaluated by ACTA require intermediate-level study.<sup>93</sup> They include not only private schools (though surprisingly, not Middlebury College, of language schools fame), but also a few public liberal arts colleges. One standout is the College of Charleston's School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs. The school offers a wide range of language and area studies majors. Students can take advanced courses in a dozen ancient and modern languages in specializations such as politics, business, literature, architecture, philosophy, and religious studies.<sup>94</sup> Many religious institutions, including Georgetown University, the University of Notre Dame, Pepperdine University, and Yeshiva University, also hold to an intermediate-level standard.

## Curricular Innovation

Curricular innovation can spark student interest in enrolling in a foreign language program, if not majoring. Often, students obtain a degree in a foreign language to complement another degree in the sciences. University language programs can consider ways to capitalize on these interdisciplinary priorities. The Joint National Committee for Languages-National Council for Languages and International Studies' (JNCL-NCLIS) 2024 report, a Rutgers University survey on multilingualism, and the MLA's most recent language enrollment report indicate that universities whose language programs succeed serve students' desire to complement a "practical" STEM major with language study.<sup>95</sup>

Community-based or service-learning modules or courses can amplify student interest and open up funding opportunities for "civic engagement" initiatives in language departments. Pepperdine University, a Christian institution, requires a service component in all language and study abroad programs. Students enrolled in Spanish study serve the local Hispanic community as elementary school teachers' helpers and volunteers for the Malibu Community Labor Exchange. As part of Bowdoin College's Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx Studies Program, students with at least intermediate language proficiency can enroll in a Teaching and Learning Languages and Cultures course to learn about language acquisition while teaching their own curricula to K–8 students.<sup>96</sup> The MLA reports that the University of Hawaii–Manoa has substantially increased enrollments in Hawai'ian, French, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish in part by engaging the diverse communities surrounding the campus.<sup>97</sup> Boise State University joins with its local Basque population as one of six higher education institutions nationwide offering Basque courses.<sup>98</sup> Some institutions invest in foreign language immersion

dormitories, for instance, the Language House at the University of Maryland–College Park, which offers course credit and even a micro-credential.<sup>99</sup>

Another pedagogical technique to revitalize language programs is content-based language instruction. Many students choose to study languages to enhance their professional credentials in their field of choice. Language for the professions, also known as language for specific purposes, such as Chinese for business or Spanish for the health professions, has become an increasingly popular type of course. Some of these programs have been shown to increase the number of language double majors, minors, or certificate recipients.<sup>100</sup> Heritage language courses, for students who have some familial background in a language but do not have academic grounding, can also bring in new students, especially first-generation college students. The University of California–Los Angeles offers Armenian, Hebrew, and Turkish in its Department of Near Eastern Languages & Cultures, serving heritage speakers of these languages in the Los Angeles area.<sup>101</sup> Students publish creative fiction in Armenian, participate in mock trials based on court cases from Israel, and access Ottoman history archives.<sup>102</sup> The tremendous success of Korean language programs in recent years compared to other foreign language programs is primarily attributed to the appeal of Korean popular culture among the college demographic. Universities should take advantage of this trend by offering Korean language courses steeped in culture.

Language programs can also revitalize foreign language study through translating and analyzing classic texts, or Great Books, the primary method of language instruction from the Middle Ages until the twentieth century and as relevant today as ever. Through exposure to the preeminent literary and philosophical works in a particular language, students will become attuned to word choice and sentence structure, essential elements of rigorous literary and philosophical study. The St. John’s College language tutorial teaches all students Ancient Greek and French through great works of literature and philosophy written in those languages. For instance, students will read or translate substantial portions of Plato’s *Meno*, the Greek New Testament, and French novelist Marcel Proust.<sup>103</sup> Some universities with more conventional liberal arts curricula offer language instruction through the Great Books. The University of Chicago has recently offered the introductory course “Russian through Pushkin.”<sup>104</sup> The University of Dallas, despite its smaller student body of approximately 1,500 undergraduates, offers primarily Great Books-focused instruction in Ancient Greek, French, German, Italian, Hebrew, Latin, and Spanish.<sup>105</sup> The Association for Core Texts and Courses offers support for these types of programs.<sup>106</sup>

## **Incorporating Language Proficiency in Global Competency Requirements**

As discussed above, “intercultural competency” or “global competency” requirements are relatively common, but they are not frequently tied to measurable outcomes. When students reach intermediate language proficiency or above, they can access the language’s culture(s) at a more sophisticated level. Incorporating mandatory, intermediate-level foreign language into these requirements would be an effective mechanism to cultivate intercultural competency, while at the same time providing students with a credential to enhance their post-graduation career outcomes. Previous ACTA research has found that streamlining general education programs to a predefined set of courses, like languages, rather than the massive sets of electives frequently

found in general education requirements, like global competency, can save substantial educational costs per semester.<sup>107</sup> A 2020 survey conducted by Rutgers University, an especially multilingual campus, found that students often used foreign languages in professional environments such as clinics, hospitals, or internships. While the survey recommended promoting “linguistic diversity” by incorporating language programs into curricular diversity or career readiness requirements, it did not call for Rutgers to add any language requirement.<sup>108</sup> Institutions like Rutgers could ensure that their multilingual students have in-depth cultural understanding and save money on vast distribution course options by requiring intermediate-level foreign language study for all.

## 4.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 1. **Institutions should implement an intermediate-level foreign language requirement.**

This is the minimum level of language knowledge needed for adult discourse, and language programs with this requirement have stronger outcomes, enrollments, and longevity. Institutions should evaluate language proficiency by national standards, such as those developed by the Department of Defense or the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

#### 2. **Institutions should seek alternatives to language program closure, such as consortia and course-sharing.**

Institutions concerned about their language program budget should consider forming or joining a language consortium. University leaders can use ACTA's Map of Foreign Language Program Graduates to identify nearby institutions that offer language degrees.<sup>109</sup>

#### 3. **Institutions can seek external funding, whether through the government or private sector, to defray program costs.**

Title VI programs such as Language Resource Centers and National Resource Centers deliver valuable support for critical or less commonly taught languages. Congress should continue to support these programs, while insisting that they fulfill their core aim of language study rather than detour into political activism.

#### 4. **Academic leaders must form coherent general education programs.**

General education programs offering thousands of elective courses, as are found in many diversity and global competency requirements, aggravate curricular and administrative bloat. By contrast, cohesive and clear general education requirements provide meaning and structure to young people while streamlining operations. ACTA's publications *The Cost of Chaos in the Curriculum* and *Restoring a Core* discuss the value of a coherent general education program and how to implement it.<sup>110</sup>

#### 5. **Institutions can encourage true diversity by building robust language programs.**

While many universities have committed significant funding to diversity and global awareness initiatives with questionable outcomes, language programs produce students with a deeper understanding of other peoples and cultures and the linguistic skills that enable them to communicate across differences.

American universities generally do not prioritize foreign language education. High-quality language programs typically require smaller class sizes and, preferably, a range of languages and levels. These are difficult to offer in an era when colleges face financial hardship. These financial considerations have made an increasing divide between elite institutions, which still prioritize foreign language education, and most other institutions, especially community colleges and non-flagship public institutions, which have cut language programs. While the United States' leadership class has a rich tradition of language education within liberal arts programs, the prestige associated with both has waned in the last two decades in favor of scientific, technological, and medical fields. Instead of going along with this trend, America's higher education leaders ought to ensure that students receive robust language formation as a core part of a liberal arts education. This essential discipline unites, rather than divides, people through what makes us distinctively human.

## APPENDIX A

### THE HISTORY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The attention paid to language is one distinguishing mark of the progress of society towards its most refined period: as society improves, influence is acquired by the means of reasoning and discourse: in proportion as that influence is felt to increase, in proportion will be the care bestowed upon the methods of expressing conceptions with propriety and elegance. In every polished community, this study has been considered as highly important, and has possessed a place in every plan of liberal education.

—James Wilson, *Lectures on Law* (1790)<sup>111</sup>

#### European Origins of Early American Education

The tradition of European higher education from which American universities derived assumed foreign language study as a matter of course. For centuries after their founding in the early second millennium A.D., Europe's universities conducted their business principally in Latin, a language widely known but not native to students or instructors. Somewhat later, the European humanists of the fifteenth century built upon Latin studies and considered ancient Greek texts in their original language essential to a thorough education.<sup>112</sup> The *studia humanitatis* ("studies of humanity"), as the Renaissance humanists termed such a classical education, allowed scholars and leaders to discern God's revealed truth. In this model, humanistic scholars delved into the grammar and rhetoric of these classical languages to seek greater wisdom about human nature, relations among men, and the world around them. Building on the humanists' "pursuit of the telltale word,"<sup>113</sup> the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers insisted that all Christian believers read the Bible in their native languages, translated by scholars directly from the original Hebrew and Koine Greek languages, not filtered through a Latin translation. This caused a flowering of the study of biblical languages in Protestant higher education institutions and sermons.<sup>114</sup> It is in this tradition that the 1611 *King James Bible* was published. In the seventeenth century and beyond, combining the European humanistic tradition with the religious zeal of the Protestant Reformation, colonial American colleges deemed language study essential for their students' intellectual and moral formation. Academics saw ancient and biblical languages as necessary not just for seminary training, but also as vehicles for texts that provide moral and cultural formation. As was customary for colleges until the late nineteenth century, everyone had the same set of academic requirements. Harvard University's earliest program of study from the seventeenth century mandated Hebrew, Syriac, Aramaic, and ancient Greek.<sup>115</sup> All nine colonial colleges had similar curricula. Requiring this variety of languages was principally aimed at understanding the Bible and related texts without relying on translations.

#### Late Colonial and Early Republic Models

Higher education was one key area in which the American Founders sought to experiment, and innovations in foreign language education were part of that plan. Founders including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and George

Washington considered the establishment of a national or federal university fundamental for educating the citizenry of the nascent Republic.<sup>116</sup> In the early decades of the Republic, America's first colleges maintained the earlier emphasis on educating ministers and laymen in Greek and Latin and the ministers in Hebrew. Despite this, there was a raging debate over the relevance of classical language education, America's own iteration of the older Battle of the Books.<sup>117</sup> Some of America's Founders considered exclusive training in ancient languages to be incompatible with the republican values of practicality and authenticity. Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush both recommended reducing time spent studying "dead languages," even while praising the usefulness of modern languages like French and German.<sup>118</sup> Franklin saw the persistent teaching of Greek and Latin as "charlatanism in literature," much as he opposed maintaining Europe's hereditary aristocracy in America.<sup>119</sup>

Modern language fluency proved essential from the earliest days of American diplomacy. Arguably, some Founders' facility with foreign languages made American independence possible. Franklin's and Gouverneur Morris's deft French skills allowed them to attain for the American colonies France's financial support and ensured that the fledgling nation could pay off its massive debt to France by selling American rice and flour.<sup>120</sup>

Thomas Jefferson so appreciated foreign language study that he not only read classical and modern European languages, but also documented American indigenous languages for anthropological *and* civic-minded reasons. The 1818 Rockfish Gap Report instituting the University of Virginia, which Jefferson largely drafted, endows a professor in the modern languages (German, French, Italian, Old English, and Spanish), perhaps for the first time in university history, thus acknowledging their cultural, intellectual, and civic value as at least equivalent to that of classical languages.<sup>121</sup> The Rockfish Gap Report asserts that German and French provide students access to the greatest ideas of recent years, Italian has unparalleled works of "style and composition," Old English is the language underpinning common law, and Spanish, as Jefferson presciently notes, represents both the beginning of the American colonies and their future: It is "spoken by so great a portion of the inhabitants of our Continents, with whom we shall probably have great intercourse ere long; and is that also in which is written the greater part of the early history of America."<sup>122</sup> Classical language study was merely an option alongside the modern languages at the new University of Virginia, formally established in 1819.

## Nineteenth-Century Transformation

Given the precedent set by the University of Virginia, it is little surprise that by 1828, Yale College saw it necessary to defend the teaching of classical languages from charges of impracticality. Yale would maintain this more classical model throughout the nineteenth century, though other liberal arts institutions such as Amherst and Trinity Colleges would stress the modern languages and the sciences over the classics.<sup>123</sup> Offering modern rather than ancient languages became increasingly common over the century as more and more colleges abandoned a unified classical curriculum for specialized elective courses in departments. By the mid-nineteenth century, American colleges and new universities increasingly adopted the German universities' focus on research and specialization, the sciences, and graduate study, and languages and literature became one optional course of study among a number.<sup>124</sup> The University of Michigan (1852) and Johns Hopkins University (1876) were among the first to adopt this model.

Established by the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, large numbers of “land grant institutions” emphasized pragmatic professional preparation over moral or cultural formation.<sup>125</sup> With greater faculty specialization, the definition of the “humanities” expanded beyond prioritizing classical philology to include other fields, and modern languages began to stand on an equal, if not superior, footing with classical languages.<sup>126</sup> The research university model became so widely accepted that shortly before issuing the 1945 edition of the Harvard Redbook, Harvard had just two requirements for all undergraduates in its curriculum: one composition course and reading proficiency in either French or German—no more the emphasis on classical languages such as Latin, Greek, or Hebrew.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, the Redbook thought it necessary to argue for studying Ancient Greek as “fundamental” to “our culture.”<sup>128</sup>

## The Twentieth Century: World Wars and Globalization

The Second World War and the decolonization and Cold War that came on its heels made speaking modern languages an urgent need for America, and the U.S. government mobilized. The change in Japanese language education was particularly dramatic. As a recent *New Yorker* article reports, the state of Japanese studies immediately before the war was woeful, with only one chaired professor in the field who reportedly could not read or speak the language<sup>129</sup> and only six college Japanese language programs of any type nationwide.<sup>130</sup> During the war, the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the CIA, set up Japanese language shops, and the military expanded small Japanese programs at the University of Michigan (the Army Intensive Japanese Language School) and Harvard and the University of California–Berkeley (the Navy Japanese Language Schools, which later moved to the University of Colorado–Boulder).<sup>131</sup> Beyond Japanese, the military developed a range of language learning programs, often using existing university programs and faculty, to give soldiers a crash course for basic proficiency when deployed abroad. The “Army method,” or audiolingual method of language teaching, was developed for this purpose and its use expanded far beyond the military.

During the Cold War, the U.S. government gradually redoubled its efforts to attain cultural and linguistic understanding, in which higher education proved pivotal. For instance, in 1948, of the CIA’s 38 Soviet analysts, only 12 knew the Russian language.<sup>132</sup> Perhaps the flagship effort of this movement, the Fulbright cultural exchange programs were established in 1946. Colleges’ language teaching methods, which were increasingly funded by and for government programs, also began to address the deficit. For example, in the 1960s, Dartmouth College’s Professor John Rassias built a program using language teaching methods that he had developed while educating Peace Corps volunteers.

## Trends in Language Study since the Cold War

With the curricular freedom of the twentieth century and the encouragement of the federal government, the college student population began to study language for more practical aims than in the past. In response to the launch of Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958, recognizing the “insufficient proportion of our population educated” in modern foreign languages, mathematics, and science.<sup>133</sup> The law authorized hundreds of millions of dollars in loans, fellowships, and financial assistance for college students, universities, and academic programs nationwide to support study in those fields. This funding was directed to

foreign language summer programs, language institutes, language area studies programs to educate students on culture and history, research grants, and graduate student fellowships.<sup>134</sup> By 1965, there were 18 language course enrollments for every 100 college students nationwide.<sup>135</sup> Increasingly after the 1970s, as academic language pedagogy became more self-consciously focused on communication as the central goal, courses on language for specific purposes began to appear.<sup>136</sup> Today, courses such as “Spanish for the Health Professions” and “Chinese for Business Purposes” are common.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Soviet Bloc languages were less of a government priority, but federal language funding continued. Responding to the national security crisis after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the federal government emphasized the importance of “critical language” study again, this time in Arabic, Pashto, Dari, and Farsi/Persian. College enrollments in Farsi programs almost quintupled, and Arabic enrollments spiked by 374% between 1998 and 2006.<sup>137</sup> By the early 2010s, language enrollments peaked along with overall student enrollments nationwide and have experienced decline since. It is worth noting, however, that language enrollments as a proportion of the college-going population had been decreasing since at least 1960.<sup>138</sup>

Developed near the peak of total college enrollments in 2010, the smartphone allowed cash-strapped students to learn and communicate at least in a rudimentary way in languages from anywhere, for free. They no longer had to attend classes, nor borrow or buy books, CDs, or software from private companies such as Berlitz and Pimsleur. Smartphone applications such as Duolingo and Babbel put foreign language education at the fingertips of the general public, including students, with no seeming need for formal education. Longstanding machine translation websites such as Google Translate, now also at students’ fingertips, have become much more accurate for the most popular languages.

Beyond machine translation services and language learning applications, the most significant development in the field of language learning in the last five years is without question the ascendancy of artificial intelligence. With personal smartphones such as the Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra attempting to translate conversations in real time, the universal translators and “Babel fish” of science fiction appear to have arrived. Software developers have now trained computers to learn a vast repository of human language through large language models (LLMs) such as GPT-4, Google Gemini, and Grok, and anyone can ask a computer to “write” an essay or poem in the language of his choice with a click. Despite their apparent ease of use, these tools are not perfect even as translators, let alone instructors: They have been shown to have bias and lack cultural context and nuance, among other problems. All these issues are more pronounced in less commonly taught languages.

College foreign language programs have accounted for these developments with pedagogical strategies—crafting anti-cheating techniques and giving students computer game-like assignments. They have also had to justify their very existence, especially as college enrollments have slid downward since 2010.<sup>139</sup>

## APPENDIX B

### CASE STUDY: OHIO COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES THAT CUT PROGRAMS IN 2024

**1. Baldwin Wallace University (private):**

French and German among the first major degree programs to be eliminated.<sup>140</sup>

**2. University of Dayton (private):**

Appeared to cut only graduate programs. Did not mention any specific programs.<sup>141</sup>

**3. Marietta College (private):**

Cut Spanish, English as a second language, and linguistics, among 10 total programs.<sup>142</sup>

**4. Miami University (public):**

Cut only the Latin American Studies major and consolidated all majors in French, German, Italian, Russian, and East Asian languages into “World Languages and Culture.”<sup>143</sup>

**5. University of Toledo (public):**

Cut majors in French and German and master’s degrees in all modern languages, with only a Spanish major and various language minors remaining. Languages were the only traditional humanities or social science programs cut out of 40 programs cut or merged.<sup>144</sup>

**6. Wittenberg University (private):**

Cut German, Spanish, and East Asian Studies majors and the Chinese minor, along with faculty positions. The only other majors cut were in music, although a few athletic programs were eliminated, unlike at most schools that made budget cuts.<sup>145</sup>

**7. Wright State University (public):**

Cut bachelor’s degrees in German, Greek, and Latin as three of 34 programs without “significant demand and relevance in today’s market.”<sup>146</sup>

## END NOTES

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