

CAA Open Forum on Proposal to change Foreign: Language Graduation Requirement from 2 semesters to 3.

Major arguments for the requirement:

First, I want to point out what I consider to be a misrepresentation of information I provided to the ad hoc committee and that is stated in the “Major arguments for the requirement” -- third bullet. Instead of “students who speak more than one language . . .” It should say that for students who are bilingual or who have studied a foreign language there is a positive correlation between years of foreign language study and scores on standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT. There is an important distinction to be made between “speaking more than one language,” being bilingual or having studied a language for a specified length of time.

Second, I would like to ask for clarification on the last bullet point of this same section. What is meant by “adverse effects . . . on program accreditation?” I would like to know how the committee came to the conclusion that there might be programs on this campus whose accreditation would be negatively affected by the implementation of a requirement that will increase foreign language study by one semester. I’m simply not aware of any accrediting body which actually awards demerits for encouraging foreign language study.

Major arguments against the requirement:

The following comments relate to these arguments presented in the order that they appear in the report.

- It strikes me as peculiar that the committee would oppose this proposal on the grounds that the case presented does not prove that “the need for more foreign language is greater than the need for more courses emphasizing such skills as greater proficiency in writing, critical thinking and mathematics.” First, studies show that the study of foreign languages actually enhances language skills in a person’s native language including writing proficiency. Second, given the cultural elements and exposure to diverse world views associated with foreign language study, an argument could be built that such study enhances critical thinking skills as well. Third, there is also a documented positive correlation between foreign language study and the math skills. The explanation most often postulated for this correlation runs along the lines that there is transference between learning to manipulate one abstract system and another. Be that as it may, what disturbs me most about this argument is that it implies that no change can or should be approved by this Council unless it is demonstrably **more** important than “proficiency in writing, critical thinking and mathematics.” In my original proposal to this council I never implied that there were not other issues as important or perhaps

even more important than this one. I have merely contended that increasing foreign language study is important and has distinct benefits across program and discipline lines. It never occurred to me that this proposal would be held in competition with other *potential* proposals. Are there other proposals seeking to increase coursework in these other areas? If so what are they? Are they being held to this same universal standard? If not why are such non-existent proposals being postulated as so important that they should be cited as a reason to block this one?

- I readily admit this institution needs to pay close attention to recruitment and retention. I have been asked repeatedly to provide data pertaining to various aspects of this proposal, e. g., how many students would be affected by this proposal, what would be the impact on resources within the college and the university. I have done my best to make those estimates. In light of this particular argument I would like to ask for data from those who oppose this proposal. Precisely how many students do you actually think we would lose as a result of this proposal and why? Transfer students are most often cited in this light. How many transfer students would refuse to come here because of the foreign language requirement? Transfer students and native students alike come here for an impressive number of reasons none of which will disappear if this proposal is implemented – especially within a reasonable timeframe.
- “Compelling reasons for . . . some academic programs . . . problems” for others. In this vein I would simply repeat my original argument that the vast majority of these problems involve efficient advisement and scheduling.
- “Reallocation of resources . . . adversely affecting” the quality of other programs. I simply do not believe that this proposal will result in any program’s quality being lowered. Classroom space will be handled through scheduling shifts in our course offering as I laid them out last April through a substantial increase in late afternoon and evening classes. It is still my contention that this proposal can become a viable reality given an appropriate timeline for implementation, shifting of teaching assignments within our department and the addition of no more than three ACF faculty positions. These requirements are not insubstantial but feasible. What has to be decided at some level is whether what this proposal offers to our students is worth the cost.
- Proficiency level – not fluency. There is a difference. One of our goals as stated in the original rationale is to provide students with an adequate proficiency level to allow them to be able to continue toward upper division work if they so chose or to reach a viable proficiency level that will act as a base on which to build later. Will this “prepare them for the workplace?” No, it will give them a more workable knowledge of a language and a culture than they can get in 2 semesters and a better base to build on. Is this valuable as a potential workplace skill? Yes.
- Remedial work for non-traditional students. Would this be the only thing? Would such “refresher” work actually preclude these students meeting the

needs of a degree program? I do not have an answer for this but there is nothing in the report that supports this argument.

- Time to degree. More time and more expense. How much more time? How much more expense? Not the semester's worth of time that has been suggested. Not an exorbitant amount of money. We are asking to increase time to degree by four semester hours and a concomitant cost of four hours of tuition. At the heart of this proposal is a belief that it is worth the expense and the time.
- Finally, how is it "not clear" that the courses and the languages taught in our department are not "those that will best serve the future needs of graduates?" Does this nation not have one of the largest Spanish speaking populations in the world? If you plan to work in health care, social work, law enforcement or education, a working knowledge of Spanish will serve you well. Puerto Rico is part of the United States and Spanish is almost exclusively spoken there; we send NSE students there. Our neighbor to the north is one of our primary trading partners and it is bilingual – English/French; we send students there. Mexico to the south of us is one of our most rapidly growing economic partners as is China. And we have in the past year and a half added Chinese to our program. The languages we teach are viable alternatives and we continue to work to expand our offerings to better serve our students in this "fast changing global environment" cited in the report. Do we offer all of the "more and different languages" alluded to in this report? No, but we are working to move in that direction and if Old Main were to give me the resources, we would. Until then I do not see how this is an argument to block this proposal. I would add that, of course, it is difficult to predict which language or languages our graduates might end up needing in the workplace or in the private sector of their lives since it would behoove us to remember in the spirit of integrated learning that education is not just about earning power or job placement. Whatever language a student studies, the skills, principals and sensitivities imparted transfer to the potential learning of other languages and other skills. Let me quote from a recent article in the *International Educator* – "While it is of course beneficial for someone to speak the language of the country in which they are doing business, I think that any foreign language ability is helpful in creating effective future employees, due to the conceptual/cultural awareness and expansion that comes with foreign language learning . . . this awareness transfers to contexts in which a particular foreign language one has learned is not spoken." (Inge Steiglitz, assistant director of study abroad at Michigan State University)

And I will finish with a quote from Martin Roth, executive director of the international MBA program at the University of South Carolina's Moore School of Business: "Language gives you the capacity to understand people and understand culture to much deeper levels than simply studying the culture. What are their belief systems, what are their expectations, what do they see as the

rules of the games? . . . studying a language gives you a depth of understanding that you can't really get any other way."