

November 13, 2008

To: The EIU Council on Academic Affairs

I am writing to express my strong support for the proposal to increase the foreign language requirement at EIU to three semesters that was passed by CAA last year but has since been placed back on the table for discussion.

Following President Perry's lead, EIU has recently challenged itself to achieve the status of the best university in its class. Dr. Perry had indicated that while he realizes that this is a steep challenge, he thinks with concerted effort we can achieve it. It seems to me that the only way to do this is to implement many changes across the university so that we are together raising the bar. Increasing the foreign language requirement by one semester would be one such change. It would have many positive repercussions. For example: we rightly pride ourselves on the number of our graduates who go on to PhD programs. Competency in a foreign language is one of the criteria (together with grades, letters and GRE or other equivalent post-grad scores) that graduate programs use to evaluate candidates. We owe it to our students to show them that we take foreign language training seriously and provide the base they need to continue forward. From another perspective: we are moving into an age when global problems must be addressed head on by nations working collaboratively together. In this context, it is unthinkable that American college graduates should not have a basic working knowledge of a foreign language. It has also been forecast that by mid-century, Americans of European origin will be in the minority in this country. This is easily within the lifetimes of our current students. Should we not be preparing them to live comfortably in an increasingly diverse country? How can we hope to become "best in class" if we drop behind in this crucial area? One more perspective: we have several times applied for admission into Phi Beta Kappa and have been turned down for several reasons, one of which each time was our minimal foreign language requirement. To be accepted into Phi Beta Kappa would be more than a feather in our cap. It would be a measure of our progress toward becoming "best in class" and would raise the value of a degree from EIU.

I would also like to point out that having a healthy, dynamic foreign languages department on campus is essential to the healthy, dynamic culture of the campus itself. Do we truly want diversity? Are we seriously encouraging our students to participate in Study Abroad? How can we do this effectively when foreign language training is not given a strong priority in the university? I would point out that foreign language study is also essential to expanding study of foreign history, economics, political science, sociology, and literatures. In addition, given demographic changes referred to above, it should be an important, even key, component of all of our teacher training curricula.

I understand that some oppose the increasing the foreign language requirement because (a) high schools and community colleges may not like it; and (b) it won't fit within established curricula. My answers to that are the following: (a) If we are going to be best in class, we should be leading the way, not waiting for the high schools and community colleges to show us the way; (b) Dr. Canfield has shown that for a majority of students, the increase will *not*, in fact, result in additional coursework; and (c) some people also argued against Study Abroad, saying it wouldn't fit into existing curricula, but students and their are embracing the Study Abroad experience as valuable and worthwhile despite those kinds of objections. Let's not be overly timid!

What are we doing here? Are we a university? Are we a university that is striving to raise its level? Are we a university that wants to be not less but more relevant to the concerns and realities of the real world? This is not a big and risky step that Dr. Canfield has proposed for us to take. It is, however, an essential step to take if we are serious about becoming "best in class."

Sincerely,

Anita Shelton, Chair  
History Department