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An **End to Foreign Languages**, an End to the Liberal Arts

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Is foreign-language teaching at the college level simply a numbers game? Put another way, should administrators follow the feet of students as they make their wishes known by the courses they choose? Sure, if universities conceive of themselves as trade schools preparing their students for employment. If that is really the aim, administrators could -- and perhaps will -- cut history courses, art, English, creative writing, music, philosophy, and much else.

Which would leave what, precisely? Business, computer science, engineering, the hard sciences, and maybe a smattering of world culture to help hard-nosed employees of the future avoid making gaffes on their international jaunts. The business model is the larger context for understanding the recent closure of the German department at the private University of Southern California and the proposal to end German at the public Humboldt State University.

In fact, what is happening to German can happen to any language -- and has. Some years ago, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where one of us teaches, abolished its department of Slavic languages and literatures after nearly 30 years of existence. At its height in the 1970s, the department had eight or nine tenured and tenure-track professors, a flourishing undergraduate Russian major, and a successful M.A. program -- the only Slavic graduate program in a public university in New England. By the mid-1990s, the few remaining faculty members who resisted retiring were farmed out to other departments, as is being done now with German at Southern California. Then, three years ago, five formerly separate language-and-literature departments were forcibly merged into one megadepartment and renamed "languages, literatures, and cultures." The dean behind that move provided no rationale whatsoever and seemed motivated primarily by the desire to have fewer department chairs to deal with.

Within the California State University system, where the other of us teaches, institutions simply do not have resources to entertain the thought of hiring faculty members needed in some languages any time soon. Add to that the attitude that those of us who teach in these fields, and the fields themselves, are interchangeable, and a convenient view emerges: The university can get along perfectly well without us.

Are faculty members, then, merely the innocent victims of administrators' nefarious, perhaps financially motivated, managerial diktats? We rather doubt it. Deans typically speak the same language as faculty members: the language of multiculturalism and diversity, which tends to take a dim view of discrete literary fields, each with its own long history, while somehow imagining that we can teach all aspects of culture at once in combined courses.

In view of those predilections, we find ourselves wondering if the generation of faculty members we're now hiring is likely to be the last with a recognizable (to us baby boomers) academic life. Given the general lack of commitment to a coherent view of the humanities and their significance, it is unavoidable that particular departments, especially in foreign languages, will be slated for elimination or revamping according to currently fashionable trends.

What has happened is nothing less than a loss of faith in a liberal-arts education -- hardly news, but perhaps the full consequences haven't been so clear until now. Training in the liberal arts aims at creating educated human beings, not good employees. It presumes a whole range of values that have served Western societies for many hundreds of years. If indeed it is time to scrap that entire approach, universities must confront the issue directly, not just eat away at the liberal arts in digestible little chunks while faculty members run for cover or rush to revamp their fields according to today's orthodoxies of race, class, and gender, reinventing themselves with no intellectual or educational rationale.

From a disciplinary point of view, the abandonment of German is another sign of the sway held at present by cultural studies, which implies that art and literature do not matter unless they can be turned into surrogate politics. "Relevance" these days is understood in an extremely narrow sense. If departments of French, another endangered language, or German studied, say, minority groups in France and Germany, it is unlikely that administrators would have the courage to disperse them.

We have been teaching Spanish and Portuguese for decades, however, and it's pretty clear to us that there is no direct correlation between student demand in an area and resources given that area. In Spanish, for example, there is more student demand than ever. Nonetheless, in one of our departments, at Amherst, we have one-third fewer faculty members than we did 25 years ago. So it isn't just numbers that are at issue; it's an entire mind-set. The trend is to replace the study of literature in a foreign language with culture-based courses, not to mention the ever-proliferating film courses that so many of us teach these days.

Offering foreign literatures and cultures in English is one alternative that we have both experienced at the different universities where we have taught. Is there anything wrong with that? Given that Americans seem almost unique in the industrialized world in their resistance to learning foreign languages, we hate to see our universities capitulate to an already unfortunate American limitation. And dare we even mention why so many more students are attracted to Spanish than to, say, French and German? Their perception -- with its undisguised condescension -- that it's "easier" to learn Spanish is rarely discussed publicly.

The argument from numbers is never a convincing one; nor is cultural relevance when it really means political relevance to present-day world struggles. Why study French or Italian or Russian -- or any literary classics -- if you just want to stress European racism, imperialism, and the oppression of women?

As for the predictable outcome? Oops! There go Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. Wait! Looks like they're being joined by Goethe and Mann. And did you catch a glimpse of Cervantes and Lope de Vega over there? Molière and Rabelais are skulking in the background. Well, big deal: We can just read them in English translation. As long as the truly dedicated few can still read Borges and some magical realists, everything's OK. Plus there's always Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales to represent the new Latin American intellectuals -- aren't they good enough?

Besides, who really has time to learn a foreign language? It's not as if we've been marvelously successful in teaching languages to our unwilling undergraduates. Three classes a week and very little homework just doesn't cut it, and the totally unreal grades that are typically handed out don't help much either.

But beyond that reality lies another. We can hardly recall the last time we met a colleague in a language-and-literature department who actually believed it made a difference for students to read fiction, poetry, and drama. Oh sure, it's always amusing in class to stress how inadequate all the old writers are, how racist and sexist, how benighted compared with our views today. And many students arrive in college having already developed those dismissive skills. In fact, why read any of this stuff at all in college? It's just literature, whatever language it's in. Whoever said education had to include foreign languages -- or anything about foreign cultures, for that matter?

We faculty members in languages and literatures have for decades attacked our own areas and treated them as far less valuable than hot-button political issues. No wonder humanists cannot mount a good defense for a broad liberal-arts education, especially at larger universities where scientific and technical constituencies whose research has practical importance can attract both administrative support and outside funds.

If foreign languages, whether underenrolled or not, are to survive today, they need to stake a claim for their intrinsic value and their relationship to the study of foreign cultures. But language-and-literature faculty members are unprepared to make that case. We used to study great writers; now we study identity-based texts chosen solely because of their ethnic, racial, or other identity. That's why many contributors to *The Chronicle*, both of us included, have bemoaned the debasement of contemporary humanities education.

Given academe's track record in recent decades, should we be surprised that students have scant interest in what we teach, and administrators little sympathy? Faculty members seem perfectly happy to capitulate to a view of education that is thoroughly degraded. Who can pretend to be shocked at the result?

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