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Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Regional

Higher ed sees decline in language studies

Despite much talk about the importance of globalization, the very places where most people in the U.S. learn foreign languages – colleges and universities – are offering fewer and fewer courses in them. In a report published last year by the Modern Languages Association (MLA), statistics show that for the first time since 1995 we are seeing a drop in enrollment in courses in all major European languages, including Spanish. And the drop is significant: 6.7 percent overall since 2009 after increasing steadily since 1995.

Spanish, the most studied language in colleges and universities (more than all other languages combined), took a big hit with an 8.2 percent decrease since 2009, despite the fact that more diversified Spanish courses for specialized areas such as nursing, teaching and law enforcement have been added.

Other European languages are not faring much better. Courses in French, the second most-studied language, were down 8.1 percent. German courses decreased by 9.3 percent and Italian by 11.3 percent. Russian is down 17.9 percent. And it is not just European languages that are declining. Modern Hebrew courses are down by 19.4 percent, Japanese down by 7.8 percent and Arabic down by 7.5 percent. The decline in Arabic language instruction should come as a big surprise. After 9/11 the lack of people in the U.S. with Arabic language proficiency became pronounced. Demand for Arabic speakers to work in defense and intelligence careers was so high that colleges and universities had problems finding qualified instructors. Yet, despite the high demand

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

for Arabic speakers, it seems that we have even lost interest in that language.

Interest in Mandarin (the most widely spoken language in China) also showed a decrease. Despite the fact that studying Chinese increased rapidly beginning in 2002, it has only grown by 2 percent since 2009. The only bright spots are Korean, which grew 44.7 percent, American Sign Language, up 19 percent and Portuguese, up 10.1 percent.

What is causing these declines? As with most problems in higher education, it is a combination of factors. One is the general decline of students in the humanities (of which the teaching of modern languages is part). Another is that anxiety over future jobs drives students to study subjects that seem more career-oriented than languages. Then there is the sense that with English becoming lingua franca (a Latin term meaning that it is used everywhere) people believe – incorrectly – that they do not need to learn other languages.

We have also seen in recent years that even scholars prefer to publish in English rather than in other languages. One reason is their need to make sure that their work can be read (and cited) by anyone. The other is that if you are going for tenure and promotion in your institution you need to demonstrate to your peers that you work is accessible.

The relentless campaign by many politicians and pundits that the only careers worth pursuing are in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) areas is moving students to subjects in which virtually all the publications are in English, making the study of other languages seem unnecessary.

Institutions of higher education are also to blame. Many have been deemphasizing (and even eliminating) a foreign language as a requirement to graduate in many areas. This change in curriculum has meant that some foreign language departments have been eliminated entirely.

The decline in language instruction is probably more related to cultural issues than anything else. Americans have always been little inclined to be versatile in foreign languages, a phenomenon that the late Illinois Sen. Paul Simon characterized in the title of his 1988 book, “The Tongue-Tied American.”

For example, we have already seen demands by American-born students to do away with foreign language requirements, even at Ivy League institutions. We have also observed how children born in this country to parents who speak a language at home other than English are being forced by their parents to speak only English so they can accelerate their Americanization process. Thus, most of those children barely understand the language spoken by their parents and have difficulties expressing themselves in those languages. Given the current political climate in this country, such a turn inward and the accompanying rejection of popular interest in foreign language and culture will certainly only deepen.

If the incoming administration fulfills its goal of drastically reducing the federal budget in non-defense related areas, then programs such as The Fulbright Program, the flagship international educational exchange program sponsored by the U.S. government, could be even eliminated, further diminishing the international exchange opportunities for our students.

Such a loss would be sad for many reasons. First, a number of studies have shown that children who grow up in bilingual environments show higher IQs and better communication skills – even in English. Further, proficiency in more than one language has been shown to increase students’ chances of getting better-paid jobs.

Colleges and universities need to be more proactive in reversing this decline in foreign language education. To begin with, we need to move away from teaching a foreign language as just grammar and vocabulary. Cultural aspects need to be integrated since they create more interest among students. Also, we need to better advertise the advantages of learning a foreign language.

Unless we do something drastic, we will reaffirm the old joke told by Europeans that goes as follows: “You know the major difference between Europeans and Americans? Europeans speak several languages. Americans only one.”

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>