International Studies Council
Discussion of Language Requirements and Language Proficiency:
Memo to the Faculty Senate 27 September 2017

Summary of Discussion

Given the recent proposal by the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences to change its global education requirement, a change which included the de facto cancellation of the existing second language requirement for its majors, and given that the faculty have primary responsibility for the curriculum, which they exercise through the Faculty Senate, ISC favors rethinking the global education requirement more broadly, and readdressing the issue of the language requirement in particular. Whereas campus discussions of this issue have in the past debated about “language requirements”, most current thinking in higher education suggests that it is more appropriate and precise to assess “language proficiency” rather than simply to impose “language requirements”. Moreover, such past discussions at the campus level also debated the desirability of a campus-wide “language requirement.” For these reasons, the International Studies Council is currently discussing a proposal to establish an ad hoc committee whose function would be to consider and make recommendations regarding a general, world language proficiency requirement for all undergraduate students of the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The rationale for this discussion is grounded in the long-term goals of the University towards economic development and well-being for its students as well as for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and indeed for the nation as a whole; such a discussion also accords with many of the most pressing issues regarding the political and cultural climate at the University, especially the need for enhanced education in tolerance and diversity. Moreover, the increasing size of our international student body, for whom English is their ‘world language’, also suggests that it is time to revisit the issue of world language proficiency.

Background and Rationale:

Given the recent proposal by the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences to change its global education requirement, a change which included the de facto cancellation of the existing second language requirement for its majors, and since the faculty have primary responsibility for the curriculum, and they exercise that responsibility through the Faculty Senate, the International Studies Council believes that the Faculty Senate should take this opportunity to rethink the global education requirement more broadly, and to address the issue of the language requirement in particular. Whereas campus discussions of this issue have in the past debated about “language requirements”, most current thinking in higher education suggests that it is more appropriate and precise to assess “language proficiency” rather than simply to impose “language requirements”. Moreover, such past discussions at the campus level also debated the desirability of a campus-wide “language requirement”. For these reasons, the International Studies Council argues for the establishment of an ad hoc committee to discuss and to recommend whether to develop a general world language proficiency requirement for all undergraduate students of the University of Massachusetts Amherst.
The rationale for this discussion is grounded in the long-term goals of the University towards economic development and well-being for its students as well as for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and indeed for the nation as a whole; such a discussion also accords with many of the most pressing issues regarding the political and cultural climate at the University, especially the need for enhanced education in tolerance and diversity. Moreover, the increasing size of our international student body, for whom English is their “world language”, also suggests that it is time to revisit the issue of world language proficiency.

In particular, regarding the success and well-being of the Commonwealth and of our students, a world language proficiency requirement impacts:

Student economic success: research suggests an increase in annual salary of 2% for employees who are proficient in another language. Although this number is small at the outset, over a lifetime of earning this number reaches an estimated 70K per annum per individual. Moreover, people who speak a second language have more professional opportunities. The relations between knowing a second language and economic improvement should not be surprising, given that the US is itself becoming more multilingual (around 20% of Americans speak language other than English at home) and given the globalization of the world markets. Research also found that bilingual people are better at multitasking, which may have its additional economic benefits. Studies have also shown that bilinguals are affected by dementia at a later age and that they have better mental health in general; both factors are evidently beneficial for the individuals directly, and have benefits for society and for the state as well.

Continuing to focus on students, we note that the most recent draft of the Joint Task Force on Student Success Learning Objectives (JTFSSLO) annual report suggests an examination of student education and the creation of proficiency as a core theme. As a matter of fact, creating a world language proficiency requirement will streamline the undergraduate requirements; the situation at present is that a single degree (BA) across campus has different language requirements. We find such inconsistencies problematic and we note that most peer institutions have minimally the same demands within a degree, if not across all degrees. Moreover, a world language proficiency requirement also concords with the JTFSSLO learning objectives of communication, knowledge, and inquiry, as well as valuing differences. As JTFSSLO suggests, we concur that it is the University’s role to increase student proficiencies, and therefore the task force will discuss how this can be achieved with regards to language skills.

At the level of the Commonwealth, we also note how proficiency in additional languages has been demonstrated to have concrete effects on local and national economies. Economic research found 9% of the Swiss economy to be connected to the constitutionally multilingual nature of its populace, and similar reports found that the UK is losing about 4% in its annual GPD as a result of its for English-first (and largely English-only) education and work force. Increasing the number of bilingual or multilingual employees will expand competitiveness and economic growth in the Commonwealth as it also increases individual student success.

Above and beyond such economic benefits, a world language proficiency requirement also leads to a more diverse, tolerant populace. As the Chancellor has stated: “expressions of bigotry, prejudice, and hatred have returned to the social mainstream”; a world language
proficiency requirement will be an important step in reducing such intolerance. As studies have shown, intolerance still exists against accented people, who are deemed less credible. However, as the Chancellor has also stated, at UMass “we are firmly committed to making this a welcoming campus for everyone.” Fighting such biases goes hand in hand with having a world language proficiency requirement. It has been found that learning and acquisition of language promotes cultural understanding, and hence is irrevocably linked to tolerance.

Moreover, a preliminary look at the top twenty public universities in the USA suggests many have already moved to a world (or foreign) language proficiency requirement; a great many among them demand intermediate level of proficiency (equivalent to more than one year, or three semesters, of academic language education or a test demonstrating an equivalent proficiency level, e.g. most of the University of California system for its “Arts and Sciences” or “Arts and Letters” colleges). Although some of schools limit such requirements to their “Arts and Sciences colleges” (comparable to HFA, SBS, and NS, but often not including engineering, nursing, and similar colleges), some leading schools have a world language proficiency requirement for all students (College of William & Mary), regardless of discipline. Rutgers University, the flagship of the New Jersey state university system, though one of the universities that does not have a language requirement, has recently published a task-force document stating that: “The lack of a language graduation requirement (except for the SAS / RBS Honors Program) at Rutgers University, New Brunswick is a true anomaly: virtually all BTAA or AAU public institutions have one.” In this light, the recent SBS proposal to cancel its second language requirement appears to place the University of Massachusetts behind many of its peers. The SBS proposal also runs counter to the campus’s stated mission and goal of increased internationalization.
Notes


