

25 October 2010

President George M. Philip
University at Albany, State University of New York
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12222

Dear President Philip,

We write on behalf of the Association of Departments of English (ADE) to join our colleagues in the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) in protesting your recent decision to cut programs in classics, French, Italian, Russian, and theater, as well as the earlier decision to eliminate German. In their letter of 5 October, ADFL President Dawn Bratsch-Prince and Director Nelly Furman argue convincingly against the permanent suspension of these programs. Our letter calls attention to the severe damage the termination of theater and advanced study in language and literature does to degree programs in English language and literature, to those of us who teach in and have administrative responsibilities for departments of English, and most of all to the students of New York State, current and future.

With member departments in hundreds of colleges and universities across the United States and Canada, ADE has since 1963 functioned within the Modern Language Association to allow departmental administrators to exchange information and to promote the enunciation of standards for English at the postsecondary level. Chairs of many ADE-member departments have gone on to become deans, provosts, and presidents. As experienced academic administrators, all of us on the ADE Executive Committee understand the need for fiscal responsibility and care, particularly in challenging economic times. Each of us has in some fashion been responsible for reducing expenditures while finding ways to maintain academic offerings. So the need for measures that will permit the university to live within its means comes as no surprise. Decisions to discontinue advanced study in classical languages, French, German, Italian, Russian, and theater, however, strike at the core educational and scholarly mission of an institution of higher learning, and certainly that of a research university of the University at Albany's stature and ambition.

The language and literature programs soon to be missing at Albany are historic, defining features of education in the liberal arts and of the intellectual foundations on which these educational programs rest in any university or college with claims to being an institution of higher learning. This is to say nothing of the immense value programs in theater bring to postsecondary institutions and their surrounding communities and, more particularly, to students and faculty members in English departments. A theater department provides the professional expertise and educational context needed to bring dramatic works to the stage. Performance functions as a unique and irreplaceable means for communicating the vitality of language and the aliveness not just of dramatic but of all literature.

With the elimination of these programs, students will lose indispensable educational opportunities for study beyond an introductory level. No less than students of the language and literature departments directly affected, students of literature in English—not to mention students in philosophy, religion, history, and many areas of the sciences and social sciences—need access to languages and literatures other than English that only advanced courses can provide, if their educations and opportunities for intellectual and personal development are to be other than stunted and distorted. In many instances, completing an undergraduate major in English requires proficiency in a second language. Graduate departments require proficiency in at least one and more often two languages other than English. Where requirements at either the graduate or undergraduate level have become vestigial formalities, universities should insist on learning a language and experiencing its literature in the original as indispensable to achieving adequate comprehension of one's native tongue and an understanding of language as a characteristic of the human species.

Scholarship and teaching in the modern languages are becoming more interconnected, interdependent, and globalized, as the historic interactions and collisions generated by the movement of peoples and languages around the globe claim attention. Faculty members in English departments cannot long sustain their scholarship and teaching without colleagues who are doing advanced scholarly work and teaching in other languages and in the traditions of literature and culture those languages carry. The nationwide movement to internationalize the undergraduate and graduate curricula in Anglophone literary study is unthinkable when neither students nor faculty members can avail themselves of the resources provided by programs and colleagues focusing on languages and cultures outside the English-speaking world.


As you are doubtless aware, many other countries have undertaken revisions in their university curricula to bring them more in line with the liberal arts tradition characteristic of postsecondary education in the United States. Their educational policies reflect the recognition that it is preferable to have a broadly educated populace equipped to work in an expanding and increasingly complicated and diverse world than a narrowly educated one.

Wholesale elimination of programs valuable to students pursuing majors and advanced degrees and to students in allied fields offers no answer to the challenges of budget reductions. We join Dawn Bratsch-Prince and Nelly Furman in affirming that programs offering opportunities for advanced study in language, literature, and theater are essential not just to the well-being but to the very being of a university, including the University at Albany.

Sincerely,



Theodore O. Mason, Jr., President
Association of Departments of English
Professor of English, Kenyon College



David Laurence, Director
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