

19 October 2010

Joseph Frey, Deputy Commissioner
New York State Education Department
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12234

Dear Commissioner Frey:

We have just learned to our great dismay that President George M. Philip of the University at Albany, State University of New York, has issued a directive “to suspend all new admissions to five area programs—Classics, French, Italian, Russian, and Theater.” According to a 1 October press release, this decision to eliminate BA, MA, and PhD programs was reached as a response to the state’s budget reduction. We believe this is a short-sighted decision that will have serious consequences for the education of students in New York State.

Since 1958, the Modern Language Association has regularly conducted surveys of student enrollments in languages other than English in postsecondary institutions in the United States. Between 2002 and 2006 enrollments in languages other than English rose by 12.9%. Our 2009 survey of language enrollments between 2006 and 2009, which will be released in December, shows still greater increases. Against this backdrop, SUNY Albany will be ranked a second-rate university offering its students an education inferior to what students on other American campuses can get.

At a time when preparing students for work in a global environment has become a mandate of higher education, it is shocking to discover that students at your university will no longer be able to enroll in programs designed to provide advanced learning in a number of languages. Nations with expanding economies, such as China and India, encourage or require language learning. The European Community is committed to fostering multilingualism by having students fluent in three languages. By being shut out of advanced study in three European languages (advanced German courses already having been cut), students at SUNY Albany will be deprived of the opportunity to compete with students in Asia and Europe. Monolingual or even bilingual American students are at a serious disadvantage in a multilingual world.

Languages are the repository of past and present cultures and as such are and should be the *sine qua non* of a university’s academic mission. The study of language plays a part in developing cognition, sharpening analytical abilities, and understanding sameness and differences of the human race; without in-depth study of languages, literatures and cultures, and the liberal arts, institutions of higher learning should only call themselves technical or professional schools.

Since 1983, SUNY Albany, through its University in the High School Program, has allowed students to earn college credits. This innovative program was conceived to give students a “‘bridging’ experience to college”; it was initiated in foreign languages and has now expanded to twenty-seven academic departments. In inaugurating this program, SUNY Albany had the great foresight to recognize that language programs in secondary education serve as a pipeline for high-level competency attainment in college. In closing access to advanced study in classics, French, Italian, and Russian at SUNY Albany, the study of these languages in the high schools of New York State’s capital region will suffer and so will the state’s students. It will take decades to revive language programs in secondary education once they have been dismantled, and students will be prevented from competing in the global economy for years to come.

In view of the extended impact the closing of the programs in languages will have on all levels of education in New York State, it is our hope that you will closely reexamine universities’ strategic plans. The state should make a strong commitment to meeting students’ educational needs and investing in our citizens’ futures. This decision is more than another item on a budgetary ledger; it is one that will compromise seriously the reputation of SUNY Albany and the education of our students.

Sincerely,



Rosemary G. Feal
Executive Director

cc: David M. Steiner, Commissioner of Education
John King, Senior Deputy Commissioner
Nelly Furman, Director, Association of Departments of Foreign Languages