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Colleges Lose a ‘Stunning’ 651 Foreign-Language Programs in 3 Years

By Steven Johnson JANUARY 22, 2019

Colleges closed more than 650 foreign-language programs in a recent three-year period, according to a forthcoming report from the Modern Language Association.

The new data, which the MLA shared with *The Chronicle*, suggest that it took several years for the full effect of the recession of 2008 to hit foreign-language programs. Higher education, in aggregate, lost just one such program from 2009 to 2013. From 2013 to 2016, it lost 651, said Dennis Looney, director of programs at the MLA.

The net loss is a "stunning statistic" that may illustrate how extensively colleges designated foreign-language programs for cuts, said Looney, who also directs the MLA's Association of Departments of Foreign Languages. "I don't want to call it a trend yet," he said, but "everything has really accelerated."

"I'm really concerned that in 2020," when the MLA plans to conduct its next survey, "that number is going to be higher," he added.

Spanish, which still accounts for about half of enrollments in languages other than English, had a net loss of 118 programs. French lost 129, German 86, and Italian 56. Among the 15 most commonly taught languages, only American Sign Language, biblical Hebrew, and Korean saw a net increase in programs, Looney said.

The MLA defines a language program loosely, as language instruction offered by an institution, not necessarily as a degree-granting department or formal unit. For instance, if a college offers German one year and not the next, it has lost one language program.

The statistics on program closures, along with other data on foreign-language education, will be published in an expanded report now being finished, said Looney, who helps write the enrollment reports.

The association has seen cause for concern in the past. In 2007 it released a [sweeping report](#) on the "crisis" of foreign-language education. That report reflected anxiety — in the national-security establishment in particular — about Americans' inability to communicate with the world in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the wars that have followed. Academe "scrambled," the MLA report said, to beef up language offerings.

But the association's recent reports, along with the new data, suggest that the economic crisis has hampered those efforts.

The decline in programs coincides with a decline in the number of students signing up for foreign-language courses. The 9.2-percent [drop in enrollments](#) from 2013 to 2016 was the second-largest on record, according to the MLA's "short report" of its findings, released last year. Measured since 2009, the decline is 15.3 percent. That suggests a "trend rather than a blip," the [report](#) said. Overall, indicators "provide little reason for optimism."

The causes of the decline in enrollments and programs, beyond the economic crunch, remain subject to debate. Some academics point to colleges' prioritization of STEM programs, or to the long-term effects of colleges' dropping language requirements. That began happening in the 1970s, Looney said. The MLA is starting to gather data on those requirements as it continues to track institutions' language enrollments.

And colleges have been hit unevenly, past MLA research shows. Two-year institutions have disproportionately shed enrollments in foreign-language courses. "The causes of — and solutions to — this trend are beyond the scope of the MLA enrollments reports," the 2018 report said, "but we hope they will be explored by others in the field."

That report also called for more research into whether declines in government funding for international education may have influenced the most recent drop in enrollments.

A decline in enrollments may itself trigger cuts in programs, said Paul Sandrock, director of education at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. If enrollments dip below a certain number, perhaps because of changing student preferences and goals, he said, "colleges look at return on investment."

A 2014 report showed that the recession hit foreign-language degree programs harder than it did many other humanities programs. In the immediate aftermath, colleges cut [12 percent](#) of foreign-language degree programs, compared with 6 percent of all degree programs.

https://www.chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Lose-a-Stunning-245526?cid=wc&utm_source=wc&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=2ced6860f4d84fc5b8af2f6a81b169a9&elq=01658b1b6e4143e38316159e6142600b&elqaid=22086&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=10825