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Enrollment in Spanish Shows a Dramatic Increase

A new report on the study of foreign languages notes declines in French, German, and Russian

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How Foreign-Language Enrollment Has Changed

| Language | 1980 | 1990 | 1995 |
|-----------------------------------|------|-------|-------|
| Arabic | 0.4% | 0.3% | 0.4% |
| Chinese | 1.2 | 1.6 | 2.3 |
| French | 26.9 | 23.0 | 18.0 |
| German | 13.7 | 11.3 | 8.5 |
| Ancient | | | |
| Greek | 2.4 | 1.4 | 1.4 |
| Hebrew | 2.1 | 1.1 | 1.2 |
| Italian | 3.8 | 4.2 | 3.8 |
| Japanese | 1.2 | 3.9 | 3.9 |
| Latin | 2.7 | 2.4 | 2.3 |
| Portuguese | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.6 |
| Russian | 2.6 | 3.8 | 2.2 |
| Spanish | 41.0 | 45.1 | 53.2 |
| Other | 1.5 | 1.5 | 2.2 |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Number of students (in thousands) | 925 | 1,184 | 1,139 |

SOURCE: Modern Language Association

WASHINGTON
MORE THAN HALF of all U.S. college students who are studying a foreign language are enrolled in Spanish classes, the Modern Language Association has found.

This is the first time in 38 years that a single language has so dominated the field.

That fact—and a rising interest in less commonly taught languages, such as Korean—has raised serious questions about the future of foreign-language programs in the United States.

"We're hearing that programs have to justify their existence," said Richard D. Brecht, a senior fellow at the National Foreign Language Center, a policy institute at the Johns Hopkins University.

The Modern Language Association's enrollment survey found that 1,138,772 students were taking foreign-language courses in fall 1995. Of that number, 53 per cent were enrolled in Spanish classes, an increase of 8 percentage points since the previous survey, in 1990. (The survey is conducted sporadically, when the association has the money to do so.) The 606,286

students in Spanish-language classes represented an increase of 13.5 per cent in five years. The latest survey is based on enrollments at 2,399 institutions.

Professors and college administrators attribute the popularity of Spanish to several factors. More Hispanic students have enrolled in college, and more students in general have been influenced by a growing sense that proficiency in Spanish will give them an edge in the job market.

OVERALL STABILIZATION

Enrollments in French and German, once the two most popular foreign languages, now trail Spanish significantly. From 1990 to 1995, enrollment in French fell 24.6 per cent, to 205,351 students. Enrollment in German dropped 27.8 per cent, to 96,263 students.

The sharpest drop was in Russian, where registrations fell 44.6 per cent in five years, to 24,729 (*The Chronicle*, October 20, 1995). Russian now trails Chinese, Japanese, and Latin.

Despite these trends, Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Lan-

guage Association, said the report contained good news for foreign-language programs in general.

Total enrollment in 1995 was down only 3.8 per cent from five years ago, when it was about 1.2 million. The small drop means that foreign-language enrollment is stabilizing after a sharp decline during the 1970s, Ms. Franklin said. "The message is finally getting through to students that we do live in a global economy."

Enrollment in graduate language programs rose nearly 8.6 per cent, to 38,677.

Foreign-language enrollments at two-year colleges rose 3.6 per cent, to a high of 236,702. Those at four-year institutions dropped 6.2 per cent, to 863,393. Undergraduate registrations in three languages at those institutions ran counter to the trend, however: Arabic and Chinese increased by about 40 per cent, and Spanish by 10 per cent.

Enrollments in 124 less commonly taught languages, including Hindi and Tagalog, totaled 24,918, up 42 per cent from 1990.

That increase was brought about largely

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by an increase in the number of students from particular ethnic and minority groups, Ms. Franklin said. She cautioned institutions not to make program changes "based on what could be short-term trends."

In response to student demands for new courses and administrative demands for belt tightening, many foreign-language departments are rethinking the way they do business. This is particularly true in departments where most of the faculty members specialize in languages in which enrollments are declining.

RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES

As the M.L.A. prepared to release its new data, teams of administrators and professors from 16 institutions were gathering here to discuss ways to respond to the pressures on modern-language programs. The meeting was sponsored by the Associ-

ation of American Colleges and Universities and the National Foreign Language Center as part of a three-year project to review and revitalize undergraduate foreign-language instruction.

With a \$300,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, the association and the center are seeking to guide participants through a self-study of their foreign-language programs. The institutions will then develop pilot projects, such as language programs for business and engineering students, ties with international programs, more courses in Asian languages, and increasing the use of technology in instruction.

Many professors and administrators at the meeting expressed fear that their institutions were not committed to foreign-language instruction. The concern, said David E. Maxwell, director of the foreign-language center, was that "if university ad-

ministrators ever think about foreign language at all, it's as part of the general-education mission—a vague notion that an educated person should know another language."

Faculty members at Northwestern University, which is participating in the project, plan to explore the establishment of a counseling system to steer students toward language programs. "We doubt that many students choose thoughtfully the language they study," said Christopher Herbert, associate dean of humanities.

'AN OBSTACLE'

Professors at Northwestern are looking for ways to make learning a foreign language a more meaningful experience for students. "It's clear that most students think of the language requirement as an obstacle," Mr. Herbert said.

At the State University of New York at

Binghamton, also a participant, the mission is to help administrators and professors decide which language programs on the campus will grow and which ones will not, said Albert H. Tricomi, vice-provost for undergraduate studies.

After years of budget cuts, he said, the Binghamton campus has lost about a fifth of all its faculty members. He said that some foreign-language programs may be eliminated and others revamped. One solution, Mr. Tricomi said, may be to limit the number of SUNY institutions that offer instruction in languages with low or decreasing enrollments, such as German and Russian.

Administrators on SUNY's Albany campus have already decided to eliminate its German program.

"The losses we've taken compel us to prioritize," said Mr. Tricomi. "You can't continue to do things in the old way." ■