
Today's News

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MLA's Recommendations on Transforming Foreign-Language Education Continue to Provoke Debate

By [PAULA WASLEY](#)

Nearly one year after its release, a report on foreign language and higher education issued by an ad hoc committee of the Modern Language Association is still provoking discussion—some of it contentious—about possible reforms in the teaching of foreign languages and the role of the association in any curricular revamp.

That debate continued at a panel held on Monday at George Washington University, which brought together several prominent leaders, including Rosemary G. Feal, executive director of the association.

The session, which at times grew heated, focused on the urgency of transforming foreign-language departments and curricula, and touched on the profession's response to the Bush administration's push on "critical" foreign languages.

The committee that produced the [11-page report](#),

"Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," was formed as a response to the focus, after the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, on a lack of trained linguists and teachers in less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Farsi ([The Chronicle](#), May 24, 2007).

National-security experts have unabashedly spoken of the shortfall in qualified teachers and linguists in Arabic and other languages now critical to military, intelligence, and diplomacy as a crisis. Yet, according to Karin C. Ryding, a professor of Arabic and linguistics at Georgetown University who was also a member of the MLA's ad hoc committee, language departments in colleges and universities are woefully short of the resources to meet sudden and immense demands.

"I have seen our profession hang on by its fingernails for several decades," said Ms. Ryding. Arabic programs in particular, she said, have suffered dramatic and long-term problems and could scarcely produce enough graduates to replenish the ranks of instructors.

Ms. Ryding also noted that public awareness of the post-September 11, 2001, crisis in language preparedness has opened a debate that might help bridge long-standing divides between language and literature professors, academic and government language programs, and teaching and research, she said. But she warned against the temptation offered by "quick-fix solutions," some of which have already led to the use of outmoded and inappropriate methods of language instruction, she said. By way of example, she pointed out that many native Arabic speakers hired by university and government programs in the past several years taught literary Arabic and ignored spoken Arabic.

Reforms Past 'Guns and Butter'

Scott G. McGinnis, an associate professor at the Defense Language Institute and member of the committee, said that the group wanted to deal both with "guns and butter" issues and the task of language curriculum reforms beyond a focus on national security. Thus, he said, the committee's report ranged widely in its reassessment of how foreign languages are taught across higher education.

"The language major," concluded the authors of the report, "should be structured to produce a specific outcome: educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence."

Indeed, said Ms. Feal, the MLA's executive director, without dramatic changes in the structure of language departments and approaches to teaching foreign languages, the profession may see the language major disappear entirely within the next decade or two.

"We're losing the language store," said Ms. Feal.

The report also offered a pointed critique of the very structure of language departments, which tend to be rigidly stratified. Such a structure, Mr. McGinnis said at Monday's panel discussion, typically set tenured literature professors at odds with untenured language instructors. Among the key changes that should be instituted, he said, was to make specialists in language acquisition full partners in designing the university's curriculum.

Ms. Feal compared the stratified structure of most foreign language programs to a disorganized department store, with a top-floor sales department that can't bring cohesion to the upper tiers of faculty members in literature, linguistics, and art history. At the mezzanine level, she said, part-time adjuncts relegated to the food court "serve out the regular verbs year in and year out with no relation to what's going on on the other floors."

So what role should the Modern Language Association and other professional groups have in advocating for changes and putting them in place? Dan E. Davidson, president of the American Councils for International Education and a professor of Russian at Bryn Mawr College, argued that such groups should act as stewards of the discipline. Given the increasing globalization of knowledge and culture, and the trend toward greater regulation by university administrators and weaker regulation by professional associations, he said, it was incumbent on those associations to take the leading role in lobbying for new approaches to foreign-language education.

Mr. Davidson advocated the creation of doctoral programs focusing on research on specific languages and second-language acquisition. The profession's knowledge of how students learn a foreign language derives primarily from research done by English as a Second Language and Spanish professors, he said, and those findings may not apply as well to other languages.

Ms. Feal urged universities to develop multiple paths to the foreign language major, and to design foreign language curricula that are more relevant both to departments outside of literature and languages, and to students' interests and career goals.

Most language programs are designed to prepare students for graduate work, she said, yet only 6.1 percent of undergraduate language majors go on to obtain doctoral degrees. The crisis in foreign-language education she said, "does not ask us to give up literature, but it does ask us to give up the idea that most undergraduates want to study literature as the exclusive focus of a language program."

While implementing the recommendations of the ad hoc committee would be a massive undertaking, she said, "our survival depends on it."

Contradictions of Purpose?

Heidi Byrnes, a professor of German at Georgetown University, criticized several aspects of the report. She argued that the conclusions were often based on muddled assumptions on the nature of language education and that the report failed to offer a concrete plan to achieve its recommendations.

In particular, Ms. Byrnes took issue with the report's suggestion that universities develop more interdisciplinary, team-taught classes to better integrate content and language instruction. Such a solution, she argued, could unintentionally exacerbate the already existing chasm between literary and cultural studies, and language instruction.

"Interdisciplinary work," she said, "will downplay the role of language and language acquisition, precisely because this is not the major interest of colleagues in history or art or philosophy or political science, or gender or film studies, who might contribute to this kind of interdisciplinary enterprise."

Ms. Byrnes also urged the MLA to play a bigger role in putting its recommendations in place. While curricular and structural changes happen at the institutional level, she said, strong centralized leadership is needed to overcome the inertia that has kept language departments divided for so long.

"Unless the MLA itself, as an organization, is willing to exert leadership, most likely in ways it has not done in the past, its own significance in these matters is seriously challenged." The association, she argued, needs to "find leaders in its own council of literary cultural scholars who will make the project theirs, who will lend it authority, urgency, and gravitas, and who will devise ways of harnessing the organization's resources in ways that will encourage the kind of changes envisioned at the heart of the report."

Ms. Feal vigorously defended the report and the MLA's role in the reform effort. She said that the committee's report had the support of the association's leading officers and that the MLA planned to lead the debate through "analysis and exhortation." She pointed to the MLA's recent studies on foreign-language enrollment and continuing research on departmental "best practices" and on tenured versus nontenured staffing in foreign language departments as useful data in lobbying for change at the institutional level. The association has also restructured its executive council to include graduate students and a community-college representative, and altered the format of its annual meeting to include a greater number of events and panels focused on foreign languages.

In the past, Ms. Feal said, the profession operated on a fantasy that students would graduate from college with near-native foreign-language proficiency. But the reality, she said, is that most programs have had to settle for teaching students to speak another language "well enough." Given the challenges, she said, departments should also set about teaching students about the process of learning a language, which might serve them both later in life and in other fields of study.

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