THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

The English or Foreign Language Major and Liberal Education

Both the global economy and our ethnically diverse society need citizens who understand the languages, traditions, and histories of other cultures as well as their own

STUDY IN LANGUAGE, literature, and culture has long been a defining feature of education in the liberal arts. Speaking, reading, and writing have traditionally stood at the heart of education because the arts of language and the tools of literacy are key qualifications for full participation in social, political, economic, and cultural life. Today the hallmarks of a liberal education—communication, critical analysis, and creativity—are more important than ever as prerequisites for success in life. A college education should develop students' abilities to think critically and analytically and to communicate knowledge and understanding effectively. The skills underlying these abilities require constant practice and should form the base of the undergraduate experience across all disciplines:

- to write clearly
- to speak articulately
- to read closely
- to evaluate and present evidence accurately
- to use quantitative data precisely
- to apply reasoning correctly
- to engage with artistic creation and expression imaginatively
- to work both independently and collaboratively

In the course of a college education, students should also develop historical and comparative perspectives by studying the development of societies, cultures, literatures, and philosophies over time and across multiple disciplinary approaches. To become informed global citizens, students need to meet the broad educational objectives that undergird liberal education:

- to engage with people across a range of languages, histories, traditions, and ways of seeing
- to experience people and places that are different and distant from those of their families or home communities
- to apply moral reasoning to ethical problems
- to understand environmental challenges

While literacy is the foundational core of all educational and scholarly projects, it is the particular focus of study in departments of language and literature, and the twenty-first-century knowledge commons puts specific forms of literacy at a premium: the ability to communicate effectively and persuasively with others through *cross-cultural literacy*, to work with new forms of media through *technological literacy*, to understand language and culture in context through *historical literacy*, and to analyze, organize, and make sense of information through *information literacy*.

The Modern Language Association recommends an approach to structuring baccalaureate degree programs in English and other languages that combines four constitutional elements: (1) a coherent program of study; (2) teamwork among the instructional staff members; (3) interdepartmental cooperative teaching; and (4) empirical research to assess the successes and shortcomings of the program. At once structured and flexible, the major in language and literature should follow an integrative model that is responsive to the demands of technological innovation and the realities of globalized societies. The major also needs to accommodate the explosion of disciplinary knowledge that, in language and literature as in other fields of study, creates daunting challenges while giving rise to new opportunities. In this context, collaborative teamwork among faculty members is required to give the major coherence and structure, and administrative

Smith College

Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)

Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) is an initiative that champions the value of a liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. The initiative focuses campus practice on fostering essential learning outcomes for all students, whatever their chosen field of study.

LEAP is AAC&U's primary vehicle for advancing and communicating about the importance of undergraduate liberal education for all students. LEAP seeks to engage the public with core questions about what really matters in college, to give students a compass to guide their learning, and to make a set of essential learning outcomes the preferred framework for educational excellence, assessment of learning, and new alignments between school and college.

More information about the LEAP initiative is available online at www.aacu.org/leap.

THE ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused *by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring*

Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, *across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance*

Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored *through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges*

Integrative Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated *through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems*

support is required to sustain points of articulation with other fields of study. The results of program changes need to be documented and evaluated empirically, through the adoption of outcome measurements.

The major's foundation

Language and literature need to remain at the center of what departments of English and foreign languages do. Although intrinsically linked, reading and writing are not natural or instinctive skills; they are contingent on a lengthy learning process in which they are practiced as an interrelated, complementary pair. In exercising their minds to achieve literacy, students learn to think abstractly. Recent work in neuroscience has made it clear that the brain is plastic and dynamic, and language is the most powerful means of forging links between existing neuronal maps and—especially important—for creating new ones. Contrary to popular misconception, the possibilities for learning languages are not confined to childhood, but rather persist into adulthood.

The role of literature needs to be emphasized. Sustained, deep engagements with literary works and literary language open perceptions of structure, texture, and the layering of meanings that challenge superficial comprehension, expand understanding, and hone analytic skills. The literary object offers itself to observation and deciphering through narrative techniques, internal clues, and external references that beckon the curiosity and intelligence of readers. As readers become cognizant of the complexities of the linguistic system, they become mindful of language and of languages as evolving historical artifacts and institutions that are intricately bound up with the cultures they express. Students also become sensitive to narrative strategies, verbal manipulations, and linguistic seductions—in short, to communication in all its powers and limitations.

While we advocate incorporating into the major the study of a variety of texts, we insist that the most beneficial among these are literary works. Our cybernetic world has brought us speed and ease of information retrieval; even where the screen has replaced paper, however, language still remains the main mode of communication. Those who learn to read slowly and carefully and to write clearly and precisely will also acquire the nimbleness and visual

Washington and Lee University

perceptions associated with working in an electronic environment.

In postsecondary education, most students gain the riches that will be their intellectual capital for the rest of their lives. Both the global economy and our ethnically diverse society need citizens who understand the languages, traditions, and histories of other cultures as well as their own. The great strength of the humanities has always been its insistence on the value of considering the past, of examining our accomplishments and failures, and of teaching the patience, knowledge, and craft required to move beyond our insular selves. Delving into other languages and learning to read complex literary texts rank among the most powerful means available for accomplishing these goals of liberal education and contributing to students' personal and intellectual development.

Literary scholars explore how storytelling plays essential roles in all kinds of human comprehension. As students of literature learn about literary structure and form and the meanings of departures from established forms, they acquire the basic building blocks of understanding. At the same time, literature supplies an imaginative context through which readers gain insight into politics, history, society, emotion, and the interior life. Thus close reading of literary texts develops important analytic and interpretive skills that play central roles in complex human enterprises. What accomplished readers do with stories found in books—inhabit them, accept them provisionally as real, act according to their rules, tolerate their ambiguities, see their events from multiple and contradictory points of view, experience their bliss—informs what they can do with stories in the world at large.

The study of language and literature provides special contexts for developing advanced skills in effective written and spoken communication—skills that are applicable in any profession that depends on writing and working with others. The knowledge and skills these studies develop also hold value in the realm of participatory democracy, where the ability to understand and communicate how ideas about process and policy have been or should be framed are crucial. No consensus or majority is gained without dialogue. In the course of their education, language and literature majors attain proficiencies that make them prime candidates for positions that require excellent communication skills.

De Anza College

The integrative major

The requirements for a major should form a series of course options that combine to fulfill curricular objectives. The aim should be to develop students' linguistic abilities, acquaint students with representative cultural examples through a designated body of works, and engage them with specific concepts, ideas, issues, cultural traditions, and traditions of inquiry. In addition to dispensing knowledge of the field, the course of study in English and other modern languages should also make improving writing and analytic skills two of its central tasks. Departments should conceive of the major with a focus on three objectives: (1) an articulate sense of the scope of knowledge and kinds of inquiries characteristic of language and literature; (2) competencies in well-defined, measurable skill sets; and (3) structures that support a satisfying awareness of progression in knowledge and skill from earlier to more advanced parts of the program.

The curriculum of a major should present an integrated, progressive course of study with articulated goals for each course. Students should be able to enroll in courses that offer a clear sense of sequence, that move from less to more complex analytic projects, and that build

on the knowledge and skills they have already acquired. They should be aware of the goals of each course and the aims of the major. Steady progress toward advanced proficiency in the language of the major is a primary objective. The formal study of language should be inherent to all courses.

Within the larger institution, the department should create for its students a social community that provides continuous support and leads to a progressive understanding of the particularities of the specific language, literature, and culture being studied. The importance of study abroad is well established in this respect, since even a prolonged stay in an English-speaking country will reveal to students how one is always part of a wider culture that needs to be studied and learned.

All teaching faculty members, regardless of rank and status, are stakeholders in the educational mission of the department, and all should be involved in the organization of the curriculum. Although the curriculum may in part reflect the research interests of faculty members, the formulation of a major program should be a collaborative educational project that first and foremost addresses the needs of the students. Courses should be designed to teach specific content in conjunction with developing specific abilities. During their years of study, students should confront texts from popular culture to literary masterpieces and from performance arts to visual images; they should also be taught the basic methodological and disciplinary approaches to these different media. Because the writing and reading skills developed in language departments extend to other disciplines, faculty members from all language departments, not just from English, should be engaged in general education. Moreover, to attract students to a major, departments should showcase their best and most experienced professorial-rank faculty members in general education courses and not reserve them for specialized courses only. Withholding professorial-rank faculty members from general education courses accentuates the disparity between non-tenure-line faculty members (including graduate assistants) who often teach first-year and general education courses and tenure-line professors who offer students a more integrated educational experience.

Revised historical understandings, new fields of scholarly inquiry, the effects of globalization, the proliferation of new media, vocational pressures on undergraduates, and professional pressures on faculty members and graduate students bring new challenges to the existing structures of higher education. The rise of digital media has ushered in new paths to the pursuit and attainment of knowledge, and universities and colleges need to adapt to the challenges and opportunities presented by this technological revolution. The curriculum today faces multiple pressures: to speed up instruction, expand coverage, investigate new interests, use the resources provided by

developing media, and meet benchmarks of achievement. But departments should resist the impulse to increase coverage at the expense of intensive engagement with great and complex works of literature. Most departments will feature courses that center on nonliterary texts, including but not limited to newspapers; film, digital, and other nonprint or print-plus media; and documents from law, medicine, and other professions. English and other language departments thus place their disciplinary specialty into a broader, extradepartmental framework from the outset of learning. They take care to create educational experiences that are effective both for students who plan immediately to enter the workforce and for students who wish to go on to graduate school.

Both categories of undergraduates will benefit from greater curricular connection between the study of literature and either second language acquisition or English composition. The study of language should be integral to the study of literature and should link reading and progress in reading to writing and progress in writing. Literature students would improve their reading and writing skills if literature and composition courses were more closely connected. Students of language would greatly profit from the challenges presented by literary works in addition to reading texts focusing on current events and popular culture.

English and other language and literature programs need to offer a variety of ways for students to progress in their knowledge of traditions, themes, periods, and cultures so that programs of study achieve depth and coherence. In every culture, literary studies are taught and learned through distinctive lenses, and we need to bring majors into the most enlivening past and present critical conversations in the literary fields. As the trend toward involving undergraduates in research suggests, it is important to engage students with faculty scholarly interests and the issues and arguments debated in the discipline. Teaching students the vocabulary of disciplinary argument and inquiry is essential. Although the specifics of particular arguments might be forgotten, the broader lesson of how arguments are conducted remains.

Furthermore, in an international context, curricula need to be designed to enhance students' knowledge of the methodologies and practices of disciplines in other countries and to expand their understanding of cross-cultural variables. Departments should therefore encourage the integration of languages other than English in courses and majors across the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences. English and other modern language departments should support study abroad and be actively involved in such programs as "Languages across the Curriculum" in ways that enrich those programs' intercultural and international content.

Speaking a second language does not necessarily make one a sophisticated citizen of the contemporary world. A curriculum rich in

Liberal Learning, Study-in-depth, and the Arts and Sciences Major

At the end of the 1980s, the Association of American Colleges (as AAC&U was then known) initiated and led a three-year review of liberal arts and sciences majors within the context of liberal education. The results were presented as a series of task force reports on twelve undergraduate majors: biology, economics, history, interdisciplinary studies, mathematics, philosophy, physics, political science, psychology, religion, sociology, and women's studies. AAC&U published abridgments of the reports in *Liberal Learning and the Arts and Sciences Major: Reports from the Fields* (1990).

The Project on Liberal Learning, Study-in-depth, and the Arts and Sciences Major was planned and implemented in cooperation with twelve learned societies: the American Academy of Religion, the American Association of Physics Teachers, the American Economics Association, the American Historical Association, the American Institute of Biological Sciences, the American Philosophical Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, the Mathematical Association of America, the National Women's Studies Association, and the Society for Values in Higher Education. Each society considered its own major in relation to concerns and questions addressed across the entire project. The participating learned societies published the unabridged versions of the individual reports.

University of Denver

international politics and economics, comparative religion, and discrete or specific social histories could have at least as compelling a claim to preparing citizens. While reading world literature in translation can broaden understanding of other cultures, translations do not necessarily induce deep or subtle sensibilities toward the stranger within our community or far distant from our shores. Insofar as we use translations to engage students with global literatures and cultures, we should make sure that translation itself is rendered visible and made a pedagogical tool that points students to other languages and cultures.

To develop insightful and sensitive cultural interpreters, the English or foreign language major from start to finish should be composed of courses that are intellectually stimulating, rich in the knowledge transmitted, and demanding in the oral and written presentation of arguments. Accordingly, students who major in foreign languages should be required to have a good command of English and some knowledge of English and American literature; likewise, English majors should be required to learn another language and become familiar with literature in another language. Reaching advanced literacy and linguistic levels should

be the expected outcome for all language majors, and student achievement should be formally assessed.

The pedagogical emphasis in recent decades on language for communication seems sometimes to entail the willingness to accept approximations of pronunciation, grammar, and syntax, so long as the intended idea is more or less conveyed. But for undergraduate language majors, in addition to basic communicative skills, other concepts should also be emphasized, including the aesthetics of language, the correspondence between sharpness of thought and aptness of expression, and the usefulness of language for manipulating abstract ideas and understanding complex issues. The major should instill the value of intellectual and linguistic accomplishment, rather than functionality, and should stress language and literature as key to understanding human achievement.

A major in language and literature should offer students the opportunity to acquire tools and hone skills that expand their intellectual capacities, enhance their personal well-being, and appropriately serve their professional ambitions. To serve these goals, the curriculum of the major should include

- courses that develop literacies in reading and writing;
- at least one course devoted to slow reading and in-depth study of an artistically great work or works;
- at least one small seminar to develop individuals' capacities to their fullest;
- at least one team-taught or interdisciplinary class;
- a course on disciplinary issues and scholarly debates;
- the opportunity to study abroad.

Teagle Working Group Members

The Modern Language Association (MLA) Working Group included the following members: Rita Charon, Columbia University; Carol T. Christ, Smith College; Gerald Graff, University of Illinois, Chicago; Marshall W. Gregory, Butler University; Michael Holquist (chair), Yale University; David B. Marshall, University of California, Santa Barbara; Imani Perry, Rutgers Law School, Camden; Randolph D. Pope, University of Virginia; Geneva Smitherman, Michigan State University; David M. Steiner, Hunter College, City University of New York; Joan Hinde Stewart, Hamilton College; Jenifer K. Ward, Cornish College of the Arts; Rosemary G. Feal, MLA; Nelly Furman, MLA and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages; and David Laurence, MLA and the Association of Departments of English.

The major's place in the academy today

Discussions of the declining status of the humanities and liberal arts in the changing landscape of American higher education generate anguish, but personal testimony and apocalyptic scenarios often substitute for research and historical analysis. The time has come for concerted thought at the level of local faculties and departments about how to organize programs of study and itineraries of student course taking to retrieve the power and interest of academic study in language and literature.

Institutions of higher education differ in their goals and missions, their size, the special strength of their faculties, and the composition of their student bodies. Moreover, majors leading to a bachelor's degree in English or a foreign language differ in literary, historical, and cultural content. Thus curricular models for the major have to be adaptable to objectives and possibilities that vary from institution to institution and from department to department.

Literary studies have properly freed themselves from a knowledge base adapted to the structural constraints of credit hours and semesters through devices such as a fixed, standard set of canonical or representative works. But as specialized inquiry and scholarship have progressed to produce a more realistic understanding of the total field of symbolic action, the problem of a knowledge base has not gone away. Faculty members in the field have mostly sought to avoid the question of how curricula represent a knowledge base through which newcomers—those who do not know what they do not know—put themselves in a position to enter the field, learn, and progress.

Even at the level of subspecialization, the materials meriting disciplinary attention have accumulated to an extent quantitatively beyond the grasp of any single student or scholar. The explosion of knowledge at the level of the field as a whole leads to a corresponding contraction at the level of the individual member of the field. Only as teams working collaboratively can faculties purposefully shape programs of study across the small number of courses and semesters available for an undergraduate major. This is the great challenge and opportunity: only departments

that can rely on enough noncontingent faculty members and on sustained resources can offer the curricular programs that best serve students and the academic community. It is hard to imagine a structural problem greater than the one we face today, insofar as the composition of the academic workforce is concerned.

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A singular aspect of the study of language and literature is that it imparts cognitive skills and knowledge that cut across boundaries separating departments and the languages, literatures, and cultures taught in them. Students trained in one national or community-based culture acquire knowledge and abilities in reading, writing, and communication that extend to other languages. But the synergetic character of study in language and literature remains abstract unless actualized through student experience in courses that cut across departmental and language boundaries. The mission statements and strategic planning documents of many institutions make prominent mention of interdepartmental initiatives, inter- or cross-disciplinarity, and collaboration. Interpretation, translation, and cross-cultural communication are areas of inquiry that reside in language and literature departments and also form part of the bedrock of liberal education.

In our intellectual and theoretical work in language and literature departments, we articulate the value of crossing boundaries, traversing borders, and interrogating the intersections between our respective fields. However, the systems and structures of our institutions seldom reflect or support these intellectual commitments. If we wish to align the goals of our departmental majors with the goals of general education, we must make it structurally possible to realize that alignment. Institutions need to invest in the interdisciplinary capacities of their faculty members through support of team teaching and faculty development. Departments need to see the creative advantages of loosening their hold on curricular property, and faculty members need to be acculturated to the broad mission of their college or university.

As knowledge expands, programs of study proliferate and course options multiply; students today have more choices than ever before. In addition, as the academy becomes more responsive to the world outside, new pressures are put on departments and students to develop skills and reach benchmarks of achievement within four years. Increasing internationalization results in greater value being placed on learning languages and knowing world cultures. But in the American educational system multilingualism and multiculturalism have not yet attained the recognition commensurate with the needs created by world developments, nor have they been fully recognized for their reach in enhancing intellectual abilities. And yet those responsible for programs in language and literature know that the skills they teach are among the most transferable. They are also the purveyors of linguistic, literary, and cultural contents that transmit cultural specificities and differences, historical information, aesthetic appreciation, and, with the possibility of self-knowledge, the impulse to reach out to others and learn the meaning of ethics.

A mandate for the future

We are committed to the notion that all students who major in our departments should know English and at least one other language. This is a radical stance, and it is not one with which students—or faculty members—can always comply with ease. Nonetheless, our political and social lives are not "English only," domestically or internationally. The value of fluency in multiple languages cannot be overstated in the twenty-first century, when the emergent conditions of life bring more of us more often into circumstances that, on the one hand, ask us to travel through the complex terrain of a globalized economy and, on the other, bring far-flung local parochialisms to our doors through the vastly expanded reach of new communication technologies. Students who study languages other than English are achieving not merely formal communication but also sophistication with the nuances of culture—both in the sense of culture as art, music, and poetics and the broader sense of culture as a way of life. □