

August 22, 2023

President E. Gordon Gee
Provost Maryanne Reed
Board of Governors

Dear President Gee, Provost Reed, and WVU Board of Governors:

We write in response to your proposal to eliminate the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics (WLLL) at West Virginia University, as President, President Elect, and Past President of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) and on behalf of AAAL Executive Committee. AAAL is a researcher association of 2,000 members. Founded in 1977, it gathers the best scholars in the US and across the world (30% of our membership is international) generating top research on the role of language in education and society, the learning and teaching of world languages, and English as a global language. **We urge you to reverse your recommendation and maintain the WVU-WLLL department.** We present below an Executive Summary, 10 Fact-checked and Research-based Justifications, and our Petition.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

1. An education in world languages, the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and linguistics opens more career path options than ever for college graduates, as recognized in the US and across the globe.
2. WVU would become the only flagship, land-grant, R1 university in the country without any presence of world languages, TESOL and/or linguistics in their curriculum.
3. The elimination of WLLL goes directly against your stated WVU mission of “leading transformation in West Virginia and the world through local, state and global engagement,” because by ignoring the global and domestic importance of languages you would forsake global engagement.
4. A number of other programs and activities on the WVU campus that engage in globalizing efforts would be weakened without WLLL.
5. The AAAL leadership predicts that WVU would struggle to attract international students and out-of-state students after making the WVU campus one that only makes space for English language and English worldviews.
6. Without their own flagship university addressing global preparedness, West Virginians would have less access to employment opportunities both inside but outside their state.
7. The research shows that “alternative methods” such as apps and online partnerships are unsuccessful substitutes for on-campus human instruction.
8. The AAAL leadership challenges the claims that the university study of languages, cultures, TESOL, and linguistics is declining, and the language requirement is disappearing from US higher education.
9. Disregarding other enrollment-minded strategies other than the complete elimination of the WLLL department is drastic and indefensible.
10. You are proposing to eliminate a department comprised of a highly respected group of productive and impactful scholars that bring pride and attention to global and intercultural commitments of WVU and the Mountain State.

10 FACT-CHECKED AND RESEARCH-BASED JUSTIFICATIONS:

- (1) **There is wide recognition—in the US as across the globe— that an education in world languages, TESOL, and linguistics prepares students for a number of fulfilling and lucrative careers after graduation.** World languages, TESOL, and linguistics opens more career path options than ever for college graduates. Their linguistics and intercultural skill-set is advantageous in the business and corporate sectors, government, non-profit, and STEM and health sectors.

In the US, the value of a world-language education was recognized in 2014 by a bipartisan group from the Senate and House of Representatives: Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisconsin), Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), Mark Kirk (R-Illinois), and Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii); and Representatives Rush Holt (D-New Jersey), Leonard Lance (R-New Jersey), David E. Price (D-North Carolina), and Don Young (R-Alaska). They commissioned a 2017 study to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to examine the following question: *How does language learning influence economic growth, cultural diplomacy, the productivity of future generations, and the fulfillment of all Americans?* The report concluded that learning another language positively influences economic growth and cultural diplomacy. It unlocks better career opportunities and success in business, research, and international relations. Equally importantly, it enhances intercultural skills and global cooperation, respect for people from other cultures, and it fosters innovative ways of thinking and working across cultures. Additionally, it gives people greater direct access to forms of leisure such as literature, music, theater, cinema, and travel.

A 2014 survey on requirements for multilingual employees of more than 2,100 US employers (2017, *Foreign Language Annals*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12241>) found that most employers (93%) greatly valued the ability to work effectively with customers, clients, and businesses from a range of different countries and cultures and over two thirds (66%) paid attention to foreign language skills during the hiring process. Many employers (41%) reported giving advantage to multilingual applicants and a full 10% required new hires to speak at least one language besides English. Industries with the greatest demand in that survey were government and public administration, information services, educational services, health care, and the administrative sector. Language skills were sought in combination with other skill sets, notably customer service, sales, vendor management, and marketing. This supports many US students' choice to minor and double major in languages alongside other majors and minors.

The central value of language learning has been also recognized by PISA, the well-known international assessment framework coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and conducted in the United States by the National Center for Education Statistics. Since 2000, PISA measures 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science literacy every 3 years, currently across 88 countries. For the first time in 2025, PISA will also assess foreign language skills on a global scale.

The people currently learning English across the globe amounts to 1.5 billion learners, according to the British Council. Thus, the global business of teaching English is worth billions in USD. There are hundreds of MATESOL programs just in the US, and indeed they do not suffice to meet the demand of the global English language learning market, which continues to grow all around the world.

New careers that have opened up for linguists specifically include artificial intelligence, speech recognition, text-to-speech synthesis, natural language processing, and user research. New private businesses that seek to attract cultural and linguistic competency to their workforce include AI businesses, Google, Amazon, Apple, Intel, social media businesses, the banking sector, and the oil industry. Careers where world languages and linguistics give an edge also include investment banking, electronic commerce, and marketing. In the medical and health fields, more and more physicians and nurses are engaging in the study of Spanish and Chinese. In engineering, German opens doors to the second largest exporter in the world and the fourth largest economy worldwide, and to top global companies like BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Bosch, Krupp and BASF.

Various branches of the federal government need fluent speakers of world languages and linguists, both at home and abroad. Some positions involve translation and/or data analysis for the protection of our national security. The federal government recognizes the critical national importance of Arabic, Chinese, and Russian, and it invests heavily into supporting language learning of these languages among our high school and college youth. It also has its own Foreign Service Institute devoted to foreign language training.

In sum, being able to communicate in more than one language and to nimbly negotiate intercultural differences offers symbolic and economic benefits in today's world, boosting employability and access to more careers. Any R1 university aspiring to educate for employability in today's world must protect the robust academic and service presence of world languages, TESOL, and linguistics on its campus.

(2) **If you eliminated WLLL, WVU would become the only flagship, land-grant, R1 university in the country without any language department.** All R1 universities have a presence of world languages, the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages, and linguistics in their curriculum. The elimination of WLLL would significantly compromise full access to a high-quality liberal arts and global education.

For example, take your peers in the Big 12 Conference. Without fail, all of them offer BAs in languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish. Most of them have not one but several departments and units housing the study of human language and the learning and teaching of languages, literatures, and cultures other than English. Indeed, four of your fellow Big 12 members boast nationally and internationally renowned graduate programs in the teaching of world languages, linguistics, applied linguistics, and TESOL: Brigham Young University, Iowa State University, Texas Tech University, and University of Kansas.

Departments of world languages, TESOL, and/or linguistics and applied linguistics are a staple of all R1 universities—whether it is elite universities like Harvard, Johns Hopkins, or Yale; flagship universities in WVU's neighboring states like Ohio State University, The Pennsylvania State University, University of Kentucky, and University of Maryland; universities in states with very high numbers of bilingual speakers like University of Florida or University of Texas at Austin; universities devoted to degrees in STEM like Carnegie Mellon University, Georgia Tech, MIT, and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; or elite private universities such as Emory University, Georgetown University, Northwestern University, and Washington University in St. Louis.

- (3) **Without WLLL, and directly against WVU's mission, you would forsake any hope for global engagement.** WVU cannot “lead transformation in West Virginia through local, state, and global engagement” if it erases from its campus all languages but English and all cultures, knowledge, and worldviews but those associated with English.

The significance of languages other than English in a university education cannot be overstated. Languages hold both global and domestic importance. Take just four of the languages WVU offers currently thanks to WLLL. Your students can major in three of them and can take classes in the fourth. [Spanish](#) is the 4th most spoken mother tongue world-wide. It is simultaneously a language of empire, a language of commerce, a language of immigrants, and a global language. It is the official language of 20 countries in Latin America, and the largest Spanish-speaking populations are truly close: Mexico (113 million) and our own United States (52.6 million). Hispanic households are one of the fastest economic growth segments of the U.S. population; they earn more than ever and paid almost \$309 billion in taxes in 2019. They make up 13.1 percent of eligible US voters. [Chinese](#) has over 1 billion speakers and is the 2nd most spoken mother tongue in the world (only after English). The economic and political importance of China in the international landscape is undeniable. Chinese-US relations present one of the greatest contemporary economic and political challenges to reckon with. Within the US as well, Chinese is the 3rd most spoken language (after English and Spanish), with 3.5 million US households speaking it at home. [Russian](#) has been taught in the US alongside world events. For example, post-World War II, university programs teaching Russian grew from 19 in 1941 to over 100 just six years later, in 1947. Sadly, the current world events have catapulted Russian's importance once again, and we predict this importance will continue for the foreseeable future. Although currently WVU students cannot major in [Arabic](#), by taking this important world language, WVU students are able to access global engagement with 25 countries where Arabic is an official language, and another 25 countries where it is widely spoken. Arabic is also the 7th most common non-English language spoken at home in the US. Moreover, the number of people in the US who speak Arabic at home has grown exponentially, from 215,000 in 1980 to 1.4 million in 2021.

- (4) **The closure of WLLL would have a dire negative impact on other programs and activities on campus.** Without WLLL, you would weaken all the units of a R1 campus that help cultivate international and transnational dispositions and character in the student body, hindering specific programs and their globalizing efforts.

Without WLLL, WVU's study abroad programs would suffer reduced demand and capacity. The numbers of Fulbright awards that go to WVU would also plummet. For example, in 2022 four of the [five WVU students](#) and in 2023 six of the [seven WVU students](#) who were awarded prestigious Fulbright awards were able to use world languages for their chosen research areas and/or embarked on careers as TESOL teachers. WVU's [English Language Language Learning Institute](#), which is housed in WLLL, would disappear, at worst, or if saved it would be left without academic stewardship.

- (5) **With the elimination of WLLL, the AAAL leadership predicts that WVU would struggle to attract international students and out-of-state students.** As the flagship university of the state, WVU has branded itself as an attractive and welcoming choice for students outside West Virginia. But after making the campus one that only makes space for English language and English worldviews, WVU's aspiration to be the gateway between West Virginia and the world would become unrealizable.

The negative impact on WVU's international student body would be considerable. Without WVU-WLLL, the [English Language Language Learning Institute](#) would disappear, or if somehow maintained, it would suffer from the lack the academic stewardship needed to impart high-quality TESOL education. This would weaken your current efforts for recruitment of pre-enrolled students who seek WVU as an entry point into the US higher education. You would also leave enrolled international students unsupported as they embark on their degrees of choice at WVU. Your 1,100 international students on your campus from 100 countries would feel the isolation of a community that has ousted any cross-cultural training and has turned inward.

WVU's six primary recruiting states are nationally renowned for their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. For example, the foreign-born populations are very high in each: 7.2% in Pennsylvania, 12.5% in Virginia, 15.1% in Maryland, 23% in New Jersey, 4.8% in Ohio, and 23% in New York. The top non-English languages spoken in these six states are Spanish and Chinese (except for Virginia, where Korean has overtaken Chinese). Prospective students from these states have often studied languages in high school and seek a campus with opportunities to continue their global education so as to graduate with skills that give them access to the job markets back in their home states. For them, linguistic and intercultural skills are key for employability, but without WLLL they would likely look at WVU as turning its back to the outside world.

- (6) **West Virginians deserve an education for global preparedness from their R1 university.** As the flagship university of the state, WVU wants to elevate West Virginians. But how will citizens of the Mountain State access employment opportunities not only inside but also outside their state, if WVU denies them a global education?

With a median household income of \$50,884 and a poverty rate of 16.8%, and an educational attainment that is lower than the national average, carving opportunities for West Virginians to participate and lead in the global economy would be truly transformative. Is the message that West Virginians going to WVU (who make up 47% of enrollments) are not worthy of aspiring to global careers?

West Virginia is well-known to linguists and applied linguists for its cultural and linguistic diversity. It is the home to a well-studied variety of English native to Northern Appalachia (i.e., West Virginia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania), to middle Appalachia (Kentucky and Virginia), and Southern Appalachia (Tennessee and North Carolina). West Virginia is also home to speakers of Cherokee, which although not taught at WVU is an important Native American language indigenous to lands south of the Great Kanawha River. And while West Virginia's foreign-born population is small (1.5%), according to the [American Immigration Council](#) it is vital to the economy of the state in farming, fishing, and forestry occupations as well as in education, health care, retail, food services, and manufacturing. Most of the nearly 28,000 immigrants in the Mountain State have pursued higher education, and over half are naturalized US citizens. Most come from Mexico

and China. Is the message that the flagship university of West Virginia does not care to include this domestic diversity in their curriculum or in their student body?

- (7) **The research shows that “alternative methods” such as apps and online partnerships cannot successfully substitute for on-campus human instruction.** We predict these substitutes would do little to stop the flight of globally and linguistically-minded present and prospective students if WLLL were to be eliminated.

Research strongly suggests that students prefer in-person instruction over online modalities because of the need for social and active learning methods. This is true for any subject matter (2022 in *Higher Education Research & Development*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1896484>) and for language instruction (2014 in *Frontiers in Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01278>).

There are a number of pedagogical advances in language education, whereby instruction can be boosted with the addition of language apps, online telecollaboration projects, and study abroad experiences. All these advances have been very well studied by researchers working in world languages, including the faculty at WLLL, who have been funded to conduct this research (e.g., a grant from Duolingo for \$79,587). None of these advances is effective as a substitute for human instruction and teacher-curated cultural and linguistic pedagogy.

When it comes to language apps, in particular, research has demonstrated that they are useful in a very limited way and that students are often keenly aware of these apps' limitations (2023 in *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1933540>; 2023 in *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1968914>). For one, no language app promises anything but getting users to a level between advanced beginner and early intermediate. Further, language app users typically become bored and lose interest after only a few weeks. This is because most of the apps that are currently available on the marketplace lack interactive components and deep cultural content. Speaking a foreign language is an increasingly important skill to have for a multitude of careers, including those in STEM. By making the switch from human instructors to mobile apps only, university students are unlikely to ever become proficient users of any foreign language. Thus, we forecast that prospective college students would apply to and enroll in other universities that offer in-person instruction, thereby exacerbating WVU's enrollment crisis.

- (8) **The AAAL leadership disagrees with the claims that there is a national decline in the university study of languages, cultures, linguistics, and TESOL, or that the trend is for many top universities to eliminate the language requirement.** The university study of languages, cultures, linguistics, and TESOL is not declining, and the language requirement is not disappearing from US higher education.

The university study of languages, cultures, linguistics, and TESOL is not declining. The National Center for Education Statistics noted a trend for fewer degrees awarded. But this is a function of how the counting is done. Four considerations are key. (1) Degrees focusing on world *literatures* are admittedly in decline, which is part of the overall decreased employability in pure humanities. However, degrees focusing on languages and linguistics affiliate with *social sciences* and are in high demand because they lead to high employability in domains such as big data,

international relations, technology, commerce, health, engineering, or law. (2) Not all world languages can be lumped together, nor can undergraduate and graduate, and elementary or advanced courses. For example, in 2016 Spanish boasted 712,240 college enrollments, and Arabic is experiencing great growth: Over 30,000 college students were studying Arabic in fall 2016, and 28 different U.S. universities granted degrees in Arabic that same year ([MLA Report](#), 2019). (3) Increasingly more students engage in double majors and minors and see the study of other languages, literatures, and cultures as bringing an edge to their main chosen career in other domains. (4) Programs in world languages, linguistics, applied linguistics, and TESOL are housed in a variety of institutional homes, hindering their accurate identification and counting, and missing many degrees. These programs can be housed in departments of modern/foreign/world LLL, as is the case at WVU and at [Carnegie Mellon University](#), or in several language-named departments, such as at the [University of Pittsburgh](#). Many times, several graduate programs co-exist in the same institution across several language-related and linguistics departments, as is the case of Georgetown University, where majors, master's, and PhD degrees in LLL specializations are conferred by four different departments: [Arabic](#), [German](#), [Linguistics](#), and [Spanish & Portuguese](#). Some programs are housed in their own named departments: applied linguistics as in [Georgia State University](#), second language studies as in the [University of Hawai'i](#). Programs in linguistics, applied linguistics, and TESOL are also often housed in Departments of English as in [Northern Arizona University](#) and colleges of education as at the [University of Georgia](#). And there are an increasing number of programs in bilingual and bicultural education, such as that at the [University of Texas San Antonio](#).

The language requirement is not disappearing from US higher education. Rather, it is being adjusted creatively and innovatively in a few universities. And in any case, universities are not eliminating their LLL-related departments.

[Duquesne University](#) is the only university that has stricken down the foreign language requirement completely, of the four cited in the original [Provost public announcement](#) (now revised and showing no cited universities). Yet it has a Department of Modern Languages and Literatures which offers a major and minor in Spanish in another B.A. in Modern Languages, and courses in six languages - Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese Culture and Spanish; and it also offers a minor in French in the Philosophy Department. [Amherst College](#) has no foreign language requirement because it has an open curriculum with no distribution requirements and no core required courses in any area. It outsources its language instruction to a [Center for World Languages](#), run by the Five College Consortium (Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst), where hundreds of students learn more than 40 less-commonly taught languages, from Amharic to Dutch to Vietnamese. But it also has five language departments on its campus, where students can major and minor: [Asian languages](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Russian](#), and [Spanish](#).

The language requirement is intact in elite institutions, (e.g., [Harvard](#), [Yale](#), and [Berkeley](#)). Some favor a centralized Center that manages all service language courses. When service courses for language instruction are gathered in a hub, the hub is most often housed at the university (the only exception, to the best of our knowledge, is Amherst College, which as we mentioned above outsources to an online center that serves five universities). But all such universities (including Amherst College) also maintain their full academic departments devoted to languages, literatures, and linguistics.

Johns Hopkins University's Center for Language Education ensures all JHU students learn a foreign language and deepen their cultural understanding, as this university continues to have a FL requirement for all undergraduates. JHU also has a Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, and its German program is widely regarded as one of the best in all of North America. George Washington University (GW) teaches 17 languages in-house through the GW Global office. While there is no universal foreign language requirement, some individual schools and programs do have one. Notably, GW's Elliott School of International Affairs has a 3-year language proficiency requirement, and GW's Department of Computer Science requires students to complete 2 courses in one language other than English (beginning at the proficiency level at which they place), or in Foreign Culture, or in Western Civilization. George Washington University also has three LLL-related departments: Romance, German and Slavic Languages and Literatures, East Asian Languages and Literatures, and Classical and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. Across the 3 departments, it offers BAs in Chinese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish as well as an MA in Chinese.

- (9) **There are other strategies to address the problem of small enrollments other than the drastic elimination of an entire department.** Singling out only WVU-WLLL for complete elimination is drastic and indefensible.

Decreases in college enrollments is an endemic problem at WVU and many other universities, and particularly in these post-pandemic times. But we agree with the President of the American Association of University Professors that "academic priorities can't always be reduced to raw numbers" (Metro News, August 18, 2023). For all other departments on your campus, you have proposed reductions in programs, mergers, etc. In our opinion, and that of much of the public media responses (in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the New York Times, or the Washington Post), singling out only WVU-WLLL for complete elimination is drastic and indefensible.

- (10) **You are proposing to eliminate a department that is highly regarded by professional and scholarly peers.** Behind WLLL is a highly respected group of productive and impactful scholars that bring pride and attention to global and intercultural commitments of WVU and the Mountain State.

Your WVU-WLLL is comparable in scholarly excellence to the programs in the best LLL-related programs in the US, including four of your fellow Big 12 members with nationally and internationally renowned graduate programs in the teaching of world languages, linguistics, applied linguistics, and TESOL: Brigham Young University, Iowa State University, Texas Tech University, and University of Kansas. AAAL values the highly productive and impactful tenure-track and tenured faculty members with international reputations and the demonstrated ability to attract federal and private funding for their research in LLL, including from National Science Foundation, National Security Agency's STARTALK Program, and Duolingo.

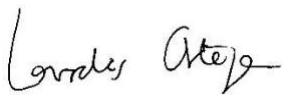
PETITION:

President Gee, Provost Reed, and WVU Board of Governors:

For all the 10 reasons we laid out in this letter, **the AAAL leadership urges you to take WVU-WLLL off your elimination list.**

You want to better serve the needs of your students, but without WLLL your student needs for global engagement would be thwarted. You want to restore fiscal health by improving enrollment numbers, but eliminating WLLL would dry up WVU's pathways for increased enrollment. You want to make WVU an even stronger university in the future, but eliminating WLLL would do grave and irreparable damage to WVU, its students, and the state of West Virginia.

The closure of WVU-WLLL would not be a step towards a better future in the state, but a regressive step that would hold West Virginians back. WVU promises its students that they will earn a world-class degree, please do not relegate the Mountain State to second-rate university education!



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