

## Report to CCP of the Foreign Language Subcommittee

In the Fall of 2006, CCP formed a Foreign Language (FL) Subcommittee and charged it with evaluating the FL requirement. The FL Subcommittee met twice with FL faculty (in October, 2006, and April, 2007). It participated in the faculty survey conducted in conjunction with the Assessment Committee and the QA Subcommittee. It has met several times to discuss the results of these meetings and of this survey, as well as to consider the FL requirement of Vassar's peer institutions. On this basis, the Subcommittee proposes five recommendations: 1) to better articulate the goals of the FL requirement in keeping with the values of a liberal arts college; 2) to retain the current requirement of two semesters (or the equivalent) of elementary language study; 3) to require students to complete the FL requirement within the freshman and sophomore years; 4) to convene regular workshops for FL faculty, and form an organizing committee; 5) to allocate greater resources to FL departments. These recommendations are detailed below.

### **1. Better articulate the goals of the FL requirement in keeping with the values of a liberal arts college.**

The Subcommittee recommends that the description and justification of the FL requirement in the Course Catalogue be revised to better articulate the goals of FL instruction in a liberal arts framework. The 2007-07 Catalogue merely states: "All three- and four-year students whose first language is English are required before graduation to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language," and goes on to list the six ways through which this can be accomplished (p. 44).

To paraphrase one instructor who participated in the Subcommittee's first meeting with FL faculty, FL instruction at a liberal arts institution such as Vassar differs sharply from the purely skills-based instruction at language schools such as Berlitz. But what precise goals—beyond language proficiency—should FL instruction pursue?

The faculty survey listed a number of different values that FL professionals tend to view as integral to language learning,\* and a majority of the respondents agreed in each case that these values make a "moderate" or a "large" contribution. These include:

- liberalizing one's experience (helping expand one's view of the world);
- fostering critical reflection on the relation of language and culture, language and thought;
- contributing to cultural awareness or literacy;
- developing the intellect (including learning how to learn);
- exposing the learner to modes of thought outside the native language;
- teaching and encouraging respect for other peoples;

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\* See Alan C. Frantz, "Seventeen Values of Foreign Language Study." *ADFL Bulletin* 28.1 (Fall 1996): 44-49. FL faculty in their remarks in the October meeting also highlighted many of these values.

- encouraging communication, and developing an understanding for the complexity of communication.

As one survey respondent astutely notes, however, “Clearly, foreign language study CAN do all of those things. But it is also the case that foreign language study does NOT AUTOMATICALLY accomplish these goals.” The Subcommittee nevertheless recommends that these (or comparable) liberal arts goals be made explicit through the College Catalogue. They would serve as common goals for all FL instructors; provide to students a more substantial rationale for the FL requirement; and be useful benchmarks for assessment.

## **2. Retain the current requirement of two semesters (or the equivalent) of elementary language study.**

Vassar currently requires two semesters of language study at the beginner level, or the equivalent. This requirement places Vassar in the mid-range of its peer institutions, whose FL requirements range from 0 to 4 semesters (see attached table). The Subcommittee recommends that Vassar keep its current requirement of two semesters. Our recommendation is based on the results of the faculty survey: 56.4% of faculty responded that the current requirement “is sufficient,” while 43.6% responded that the current requirement is insufficient.

It should, however, be noted that serious questions remain about whether two semesters of language study are sufficient to accomplish the goals of a liberal arts language education. Thus, one respondent to the faculty survey writes, “It is also unclear how many of these [goals] can be accomplished by one year of beginning study.” While acknowledging this reservation, we respect the decisive majority of the respondents to the faculty survey who voted in favor of retaining the current two-semester requirement. In addition, it is important to note that, between 2002 and 2006, of the students who met the FL requirement with a Vassar course, 55% took 3 or more foreign language units. Indeed, a striking 22% took more than 5 units. Clearly, the majority of students at Vassar are significantly invested in acquiring a high level of proficiency in a foreign language, beyond simply meeting the FL requirement. Nevertheless, given the surprisingly large percentage of faculty who feel that the current requirement is insufficient, the Subcommittee recommends that issue of the length of the FL requirement be reconsidered in five years.

## **3. The FL requirement should be completed in the freshman and sophomore years.**

Both the Freshman Writing Course and the QA requirements are expected to be met within the first two years of study at Vassar. The Subcommittee recommends that the FL requirement likewise be met within the freshman and sophomore years. There are three main reasons for this recommendation. First, FL classes tend to cultivate a strong group dynamic and a close-knit community of learners. This strong sense of community would

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· Figures based on information provided by the Office of the Registrar.

particularly benefit pre-major students who are transitioning into the college experience and have yet to find a “home” in their major program or department. Second, meeting the FL requirement early in a student’s college career would better prepare her or him for going JYA, opening the door for a JYA experience in a non-anglophone country. Third, fulfilling this requirement within the first two years would give students the opportunity to pursue more advanced language study while at Vassar.

#### **4. Convene regular workshops for FL faculty, and form an organizing committee.**

The Subcommittee recommends that regular workshops be convened for FL faculty along the lines of the workshops currently organized for instructors of the Freshman Writing Course. These workshops would foster greater discussion of the pedagogical goals of the FL requirement, and strategies for meeting these goals. They would also contribute toward greater cooperation between FL instructors across different departments, particularly between instructors of departments housed in Chicago Hall and those housed elsewhere (including, but not limited to, Chinese and Japanese).

We recommend that these workshops be led by outside experts in the field of second language acquisition and pedagogy. In conjunction with an annual workshop, we also recommend the organization of a forum in which Vassar faculty share with one another successful pedagogical strategies for FL instruction, particularly at the elementary and lower intermediate level.

To facilitate the selection of workshop leaders and the organization of the workshop, we further recommend that each FL department elect a member to an organizational committee with a rotating chairperson.

#### **5. Allocate greater resources to FL departments.**

The Subcommittee strongly recommends that the College allocate greater resources to FL departments to enable them to better meet the goals of the FL requirement as well as continued language study. While the recent renovations in Chicago Hall are greatly appreciated and have improved the teaching and learning environment, they fall significantly short of meeting the needs of students and instructors. Current problems include a general room shortage, rooms too small to accommodate large class sizes (a problem that particularly affects introductory language classes), and an outdated resource center.

To remedy this situation, we urge that the construction of a new foreign language building be given high priority. Such a building would:

- provide more adequate classroom and office space, including office space for instructors in the Self-Instructional Language Program.
- accommodate the Department of Chinese and Japanese as well as those departments currently housed in Chicago Hall (French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish, along with the Self-Instructional Language Program).

- potentially accommodate multidisciplinary programs whose interests intersect centrally with FL programs (including, but not limited to, International Studies, Asian Studies, and Latin American Studies).
- enhance the technological resources available in the Foreign Language Resource Center, including a more pedagogically suitable computer classroom and screening room.
- include a lounge with satellite TV for the less commonly taught languages. This could serve the needs of International Studies and other area studies programs as well.

We further recommend that the College increase the library budget for purchasing foreign language materials, including a wider range of access to foreign language materials through the Internet.

In addition, we recommend that the College hire computing staff with proficiency in languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese whose scripts are non-Roman.

The Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) recommends an “optimum class size” of 15 students, and a maximum FL class size of 20 students, particularly at the elementary and intermediate levels.\* In keeping with this guideline, Vassar should look toward hiring more faculty members in departments in which language class sizes are ballooning.

Respectfully submitted by the FL Subcommittee (Mark Christel, Peipei Qiu, Leora Rothenberg [‘07], Elliott Schreiber)

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\* “ADFL Guidelines and Policy Statements,” <http://www.adfl.org/projects/index.htm>.

**Required Semesters of FL Study at Vassar and Peer Institutions**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Requirement</b>
Amherst	No general FL requirement
Barnard	4 semesters
Bowdoin	No general FL requirement
Bryn Mawr	4 semesters
Colby	3 semesters
Colgate	3 semesters
Dartmouth	3 semesters
Franklin and Marshall	2 semesters
Hamilton	No general FL requirement
Haverford	2 semesters
Middlebury	No general requirement (FL <i>may</i> be used to fulfill a broader distribution req.)
Mount Holyoke	2 semesters
Oberlin	No FL requirement (though encourage proficiency at 2 <sup>nd</sup> yr., college-level)—9 credit hours in cultural diversity, which include FL courses
Smith	No general FL requirement
Swarthmore	2 semesters
Trinity	3 semesters
Union	2 semesters
Vassar	2 semesters
Wellesley	4 semesters
Wesleyan	No general FL requirement
Williams	No general FL requirement