

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

The 2002 report on foreign languages by the Modern Language Association brought good news. Overall, enrollments at U.S. colleges and universities reached 1.4 million students, the highest number ever recorded and an increase of 18% from 1998. In fact, the increases were across the board and included a 1.5% rise in French from 199,064 students in 1998 to 202,014 in 2002. This is encouraging for all of us who teach French, especially after the wave of francophobia that swept the United States in 2003. Whether the increase will hold up (the report was concluded before the anti-French sentiment was manifested) is another question, but we should take pride in our work. This is especially true for primary and secondary teachers who have continued to motivate and energize their students in the difficult times since September 11, 2001, thus stimulating them to continue their study of French at the college or university level. National French Week has undoubtedly contributed to the recovery, and we are grateful to Gladys Lipton and all those who helped to institute this national celebration across the United States.

Increases in other languages were greater than those in French. Spanish enrollments rose from 656,590 to 746,602, an increase of 13.7%, providing more evidence that Spanish is quickly attaining the status of a national language and should be considered as such. German increased by 12.5% from 89,020 to 100,112 and Italian by 29.6% from 49,287 to 63,866. It is satisfying to see that our heritage languages are doing well, but less commonly taught languages have also seen increases. Arabic, for example, nearly doubled to 10,596 students, and Japanese, Chinese, and Russian all increased their numbers as well.

It is clear from the statistics that more students than ever are persuaded that studying foreign languages is in their best interest in a world that has become both smaller and larger; smaller because it is easier to reach remote corners of the planet and larger because we are encountering more and more cultures different from our own. The amazing word, "global" and its many derivatives, including "globalization," that fuzzy and ill-defined term, have captured the imaginations of students, administrators, and faculty alike. One of the results is that many campuses have begun to develop what they call majors or minors in "Global Studies," often conceived and orchestrated in Offices of International Programs, as is the case on my own campus. Insofar as such programs require foreign languages as part of their program and promote in-depth knowledge of other cultures, they can only bring positive results. Nonetheless, we should resist the temptation to give academic credits for "academic tourism," that is, quick trips abroad that do not prepare their students for the culture they are to visit and fail to place the students in contact with the people whose country they are visiting.

Another positive sign is the growing number of universities which are developing curricula that highlight the theme of diversity and require students to take courses of this kind as part of their core curriculum. The term, "multicultural," is finally beginning to include the study of foreign cultures and not just subsets of different ethnic groups and cultures found in the United States. Moreover, language and literature teachers are being encouraged to present diversity, including minorities, within the foreign culture itself as a way of examining the diversity that exists within all countries and their cultures, a positive step.

The MLA report reveals that 8.7% of all university students were taking a foreign language in the fall of 2002, the highest percentage since 1972. This too is good news, although it shows that a woefully small percentage of college and university students ever study a foreign language at all. Let us not forget that there is still a lot of work to be done in a world where there are severe imbalances in the distribution of income and natural resources and where we are all too often unable to communicate in the language of the countries we visit and with whom we do business. We must also recognize that sending our students abroad to foreign countries, but having them take their courses in English in the foreign country, will not provide them with the kind of in-depth cultural and linguistic training they will need to function well in a foreign environment. Depending on the foreigner to speak English is not the answer and we should not let these so-called "island programs" suggest to students that it is acceptable to go to a foreign country and simply take courses in English.

So, let us take the good news and build on it in our own setting as well as encourage our students to study in a variety of francophone countries around the world. Perhaps in four more years we will see further increases in the study of foreign languages in the United States, including French!

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