JNCL-NCLIS

HIGHER EDUCATION SURVEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION

A Roadmap for Language Education Advocacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

This report is designed to provide information to language advocates looking for ways to support their programs at institutions of higher education. In response to a recent uptick in requests for support as well as reporting of national data, JNCL-NCLIS conducted an informal voluntary survey of language department leaders to gain insight into the challenges being faced by language programs.

The Challenges

These common issues point to a lack of overall understanding of the value and importance of language learning at higher education by university leaders and decision makers.

53%
Low Student Enrollment

26%
Lack of Support from the Institution

13%
Changes to language requirements/ curriculum

13%
Limited Staffing and Resources

11%
Financial Constraints

Efforts to Support Language Programs

In response to the identified challenges, language departments are employing various strategies to improve their situations. These efforts reflect proactive and innovative approaches to overcoming the obstacles faced by language programs.

Interdisciplinary Courses

Collaboration with Other Departments

New Developments and Innovations

Take Action

To advocate for and protect language education at higher education institutions (IHEs), we suggest the following:

- **Strengthen Advocacy Through Data and Research**
- **Enhance Institutional and Community Engagement**
- **Foster Interdisciplinary Collaboration**
- **Create and Support Advocacy Networks**

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, language programs in higher education face a multitude of challenges that impact their sustainability and effectiveness. The MLA Report, "*Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2021*," shared a very clear view of the decrease in programs and enrollments across the country, with very few exceptions.[1] In order to provide the best advocacy tools and strategy possible, JNCL-NCLIS issued a survey aimed at primarily collecting qualitative information from higher education program representatives. Outreach was conducted digitally with the help of our member organizations.

Through comprehensive analysis of survey responses from a diverse array of institutions, this report aims to illuminate the common issues and innovative strategies within language programs across the United States to impact our strategies nationally, regionally, and locally to advocate for language education at higher education.

The challenges identified encompass declining enrollments, lack of institutional support, perceptions of language study, curricular changes, recruitment and retention difficulties, interdisciplinary collaboration hurdles, budget constraints, and the ongoing struggle to highlight the relevance and value of language proficiency. These issues underscore the complexities faced by language programs in adapting to changing educational environments and student needs as well as the way that the humanities have been disproportionately targeted by institutions focusing on budget.

However, amidst these challenges, there are notable efforts and initiatives being undertaken by language programs to address these concerns. **From curricular changes to interdisciplinary collaboration and community outreach, institutions are employing a variety of strategies to enhance language education and promote its importance in an interconnected world.**

JNCL-NCLIS has been addressing the issues of higher education program sustainability and program cuts based on the many requests for support we receive from our members. In November of 2023, JNCL-NCLIS released a statement regarding the work continuously being done to advocate for and protect individual programs in the face of the enrollment decreases as well as other budgetary factors.[2]

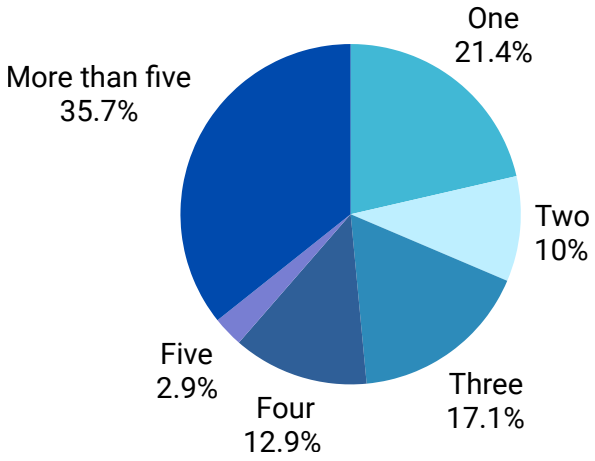
1 Modern Language Association. *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in U.S. Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2021.* MLA, 2023. https://www.mla.org/content/download/191324/file/Enrollments-in-Languages-Other-Than-English-in-US-Institutions-of-Higher-Education-Fall-2021.pdf.

2 Joint National Committee for Languages. "JNCL-NCLIS Statement on the 2021 MLA Report on Enrollment in Higher Education Language Courses." *JNCL*, March 2, 2023. *https://www.languagepolicy.org/post/jncl-nclis-statement-on-the-2021-mla-report-on-enrollment-in-higher-education-language-courses*

INTRODUCTION CONT.

The chart below shows that most colleges and universities are persisting in their efforts to maintain and grow language degree programs. Based on survey responses, more than two-thirds of surveyed schools offer three or more different undergraduate language majors.

Figure 1. Number of Undergraduate Language Degree (Majors) Programs



Language programs in educational institutions face numerous challenges but also show promising developments and innovative approaches. This report synthesizes the findings from a survey conducted among 70 language departments across various public and private North American universities, including 29 private institutions, 30 public institutions, and 11 unidentified with more than 25 states represented. The survey, conducted informally, aims to gather information to guide advocacy efforts and foster a national discussion around language education in higher education.

Figure 2. Institution Type

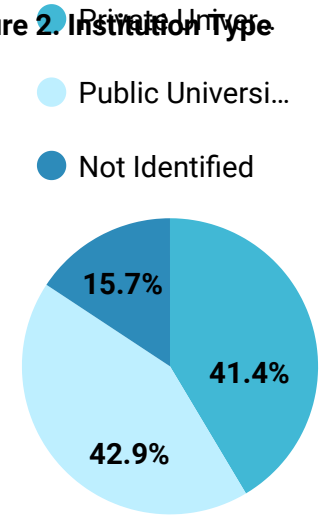
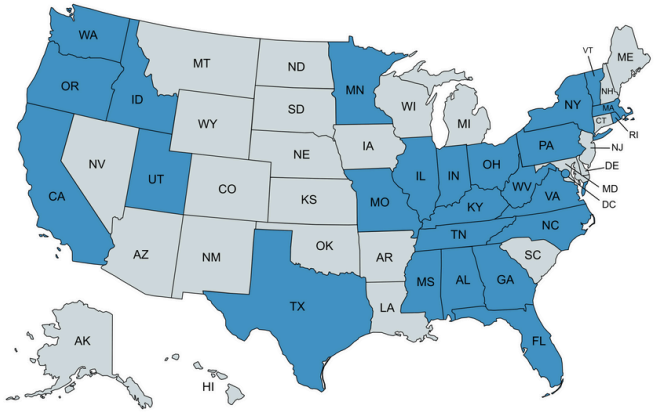


Figure 3. States Represented



CHALLENGES FACING IHE LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

The survey reveals that language programs are grappling with several key challenges that threaten their sustainability and effectiveness. Over half of respondents noted that their departments are experiencing a drop in student enrollment, which directly impacts the viability of language courses. Financial limitations further strain these programs, making it difficult to acquire necessary resources and maintain high-quality instruction. Additionally, more than one-quarter of respondents reported that their department struggles with a lack of support from their institutions' administration, which affects their ability to advocate for and implement needed changes. Rigid curricula and limited teaching resources also pose significant hurdles, preventing departments from adapting to modern educational demands and providing engaging learning experiences. Many respondents also noted that these challenges are often accompanied by the perception that languages are not valuable or that they are in direct competition with STEM courses.

The common issues reported highlight the current landscape and top concerns within language programs in higher education. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the survival and growth of language programs.

Figure 4. Challenges Reported by IHE Language Departments

Challenge	% of Respondents Reporting Challenge
Low Enrollment	52.8%
Lack of Institutional/Administrative Support	25.7%
Changes to Language Requirements/Curriculum	12.8%
Lack of Full-Time Faculty/Staffing Issues	12.8%
Budget Cuts/Funding Issues	11.4%

"There is always a threat that some of our language majors and/or minors might get cut due to relatively small enrollments in upper-division language courses. This, in turn, threatens our language teacher preparation programs which then has a trickle-down effect in the K-12 system. We are seeing this now in New York State, specifically in French. Several of the upstate colleges have cut their French programs and as a consequence their French teacher preparation programs. High schools are having a very difficult time finding certified French teachers. Exactly the same thing happened in German approximately 25 years ago. There are now almost no high schools in New York State which still offer German. It's a vicious circle: No college programs, no high school teachers, no high school students/programs, no college students in the language, no college programs."

Dr. Sarah Jourdain
Chair, Department of Languages & Cultural Studies
Director, World Language Teacher Preparation
Stony Brook University (SUNY), Stony Brook, NY

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES

In response to the identified challenges, language departments are employing various strategies to improve their situations. Many departments are actively promoting their courses through marketing and outreach programs to boost enrollment. To alleviate budget constraints, some are seeking external funding through grants and donations. Engaging with administrators is a common strategy to secure more institutional support and recognition. Curriculum development efforts are underway to make language courses more interdisciplinary and appealing. Enhancing digital infrastructure and resources is also a priority, with departments incorporating more online materials and advanced teaching tools. These efforts reflect a proactive approach to overcoming the obstacles faced by language programs.

Figure 5. Efforts to Combat Challenges Reported by IHE Language Departments

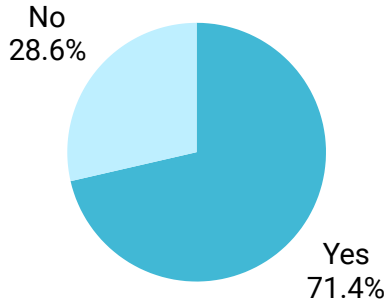
Effort	% of Respondents Reporting Effort
Marketing and Outreach	52.8%
Seeking External Funding	25.7%
Engaging with Administration	21.4%
Curriculum Development	14.2%
Enhancing Digital Infrastructure	12.8%

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES CONT

INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSES

Interdisciplinary courses have emerged as a strategic response to the evolving educational landscape, aiming to attract a broader student base and demonstrate the practical relevance of language skills. A significant number of language departments are offering courses that integrate language instruction with other academic disciplines. In this survey, 71% of departments reported offering interdisciplinary courses. These interdisciplinary offerings not only enhance students' language proficiency but also provide them with valuable insights into other fields, thereby increasing the appeal and applicability of language studies. Examples include courses that combine language learning with history (25%), business (20%), science (15%), and the arts (10%). These courses help students see the real-world applications of their language skills, making language learning more engaging and relevant.

Figure 6. Number of Language Departments that Offer Interdisciplinary Courses



Top 3 Interdisciplinary Courses

25%
History & Language Studies

20%
Business & Language Studies

15%
Science & Language Studies

COLLABORATION WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS

Collaboration with other departments is a key strategy to support and promote language education. By working together, departments can leverage shared resources, create interdisciplinary programs, and organize joint events that enhance the visibility and appeal of language courses. These collaborations also foster a more integrated and holistic educational experience for students, showing them how language skills intersect with various academic and professional fields. Moreover, this demonstrates to university leadership as a whole how integral it is to have a fully connected learning experience for students. Many survey respondents indicated that their institutions are actively engaged in such partnerships, which include organizing cultural festivals, offering cross-listed courses, participating in interdepartmental committees, and sharing facilities and resources.

Figure 7. Types of Collaboration Reported by IHE Language Departments

Type of Collaboration	% of Respondents Reporting Collaboration
Joint Events and Festivals	34.2%
Cross-listed Courses	28.5%
Interdepartmental Committees	22.8%
Shared Resources	17.1%

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES CONT.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND INNOVATIONS

Language programs are continuously evolving to meet the changing needs and preferences of students. The survey reveals a range of innovative practices being adopted by language departments to enhance their offerings and stay relevant. Online and hybrid courses are becoming increasingly common, providing greater accessibility and flexibility for students. The use of advanced technological tools, such as language learning applications, virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI), is enhancing the learning experience. Departments are also establishing partnerships with local communities and organizations to provide practical language practice and cultural exchange opportunities. Faculty development programs are being implemented to ensure that instructors stay updated with the latest teaching methodologies and technologies. Additionally, new study abroad programs are being introduced to offer immersive language learning experiences. These innovations reflect the dynamic nature of language education and the commitment of departments to continually improve their programs.

Figure 8. Types of Innovative Practices Reported by IHE Language Departments

Type of Innovative Practice	% of Respondents Reporting Innovative Practice
Online and Hybrid Courses	51.4%
Use of Advanced Technologies	40%
Community Partnerships	34.2%
Faculty Development Programs	28.5%
New Study Abroad Programs	22.8%

EXAMPLES OF IHEs TAKING ACTION AND INNOVATING

A. Franklin and Marshall University, Pennsylvania
Community Based Learning

The university created a permanent faculty position dedicated to community-based learning for Spanish and the development of a "departmental strategy for community-based learning across all levels". This Teaching Professor position is a non-tenurable position and has 3-5 year contracts. The position has a reduced teaching load to allow for the administrative demands of building and maintaining relationships with multiple community organizations including the Latin American Alliance and the local bilingual radio station. Community-Based Learning (CBL) was incorporated into some Spanish courses and the department plans to expand this approach to other courses in the future.

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES CONT.

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B. Columbia University, New York
Enrollment Task Force

An enrollment task force was formed consisting of 6 faculty members (3 professors, 3 lecturers) and the director of Columbia's Paris program. As a result, the university is introducing experiential courses with internships attached, increasing outreach to high school students, especially heritage speakers, and enhancing the Paris offerings to include science coursework.

C. Brown University, Rhode Island
Certificate in Intercultural Competence

The inaugural class of graduates for the Certificate in Languages and Cultures (CIC) in May 2024 consisted of four seniors, with subsequent enrollment numbers already showing significant growth. Eight juniors are currently enrolled, reflecting a 100% increase from the previous year, and the core course requirement saw a 400% increase in enrollment, rising from 8 students in Fall 2022 to 33 in Fall 2023. This positive trend is encouraging for the program's future, particularly as it highlights the unexpected interest from STEM students—many of whom are pursuing degrees in fields like Applied Math, Computational Biology, Chemical Physics, and Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. While these students typically do not major in languages, their strong interest in the CIC demonstrates the program's appeal and potential for continued growth.

D. Southern Methodist University (SMU), Texas
Global Literacy and Languages for Specific Purposes

SMU is working to make languages relevant beyond the second language requirement and is collaborating with all language areas on shifting to a more Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) focused curriculum. The Research Cluster on "Global Literacy and Languages for Specific Purposes: Curricular Design for Building Transferable Skills" brings together faculty and alumni from diverse disciplines to develop programs that equip students with global perspectives and skills valued by employers. This initiative focuses on creating interdisciplinary, context-specific curricula within the World Languages and Literatures department to enhance cross-cultural communication and meet employer needs. The cluster addresses topics such as curricular innovation, academic and corporate partnerships, and the integration of world languages into SMU's Common Curriculum to prepare students for professional roles in a globalized workplace.

E. Montclair State University, New Jersey
The Bachelor of Arts in Language, Business & Culture

The Bachelor of Arts in Language, Business & Culture is an interdisciplinary program that integrates language and cultural studies with essential business skills. Offered by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Feliciano School of Business, this innovative major allows students to specialize in languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Russian, or Spanish, while also gaining expertise in areas like international business, finance, and cross-cultural communication. The program emphasizes experiential learning through international experiences and a capstone course, preparing students for diverse careers in global industries and further academic pursuits in various fields.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The findings of this report underscore the resilience and innovation inherent within language programs in higher education. Despite facing significant challenges, some institutions are proactively addressing these issues through a multifaceted approach that prioritizes collaboration, adaptation, and advocacy.

From the development of interdisciplinary courses to the implementation of technology-enhanced learning methods, language programs are evolving to meet the diverse needs of students and adapt to changing educational landscapes. Moreover, the dedication of faculty, combined with strategic partnerships and community engagement efforts, reflects a commitment to promoting the value of language proficiency and cultural understanding.

As language programs continue to navigate the complexities of today's higher education environment, it is imperative for institutional leadership to provide support for collaborative efforts to innovate. By doing so, they can ensure the resilience and sustainability of language education, equipping students with the skills and cultural competencies needed to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

The universities that participated in this survey have given us important information that represents the clear challenges as well as the innovative opportunities for advocacy. JNCL-NCLIS has identified action steps that can be taken to advocate for language programs in higher education. To advocate for and protect language education at higher education institutions (IHEs), we suggest the following:

Strengthen Advocacy Through Data and Research

- Compile and Share Data: Use the findings from surveys, such as the JNCL-NCLIS *"Higher Education Survey Findings & Recommendations for Language Education"* report, to create compelling advocacy materials that highlight the importance of language education and the challenges it faces. Prepare comprehensive reports, infographics, and case studies to present to institutional leaders, legislators, and other stakeholders.
- Promote Research-Based Benefits: Emphasize the benefits of language education supported by research, including cognitive, cultural, and career advantages. Share success stories and data that demonstrate how language skills enhance employability and global competitiveness.

Foster Interdisciplinary Collaboration

- Develop and Promote Interdisciplinary Courses: Advocate for and help develop courses that combine language study with other disciplines, such as business, science, and the arts. Highlight the value of these interdisciplinary courses in attracting a broader student base and demonstrating the practical applications of language skills.
- Initiate Collaborative Projects: Encourage partnerships between language departments and other academic units. For instance, collaborate on joint research projects, cultural events, or community engagement initiatives that showcase the relevance of language education across different fields

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS CONT.

Enhance Institutional and Community Engagement

- Build Strong Relationships with Administrators: Engage with institutional leaders to secure better support and resources for language programs. Present data-driven arguments and advocate for the inclusion of language programs in strategic planning and budget discussions.
- Expand Community Outreach: Increase efforts to connect with local communities, businesses, and organizations. Develop community-based learning opportunities, such as internships and service projects, that demonstrate the practical impact of language skills and build external support for language programs.

Create and Support Advocacy Networks

- Form a Consortium: Establish a consortium of colleges and universities to collaborate on language instruction. Share upper-division language courses across institutions to maximize resources and offer a broader range of courses. Promote the benefits of such consortia in terms of resource efficiency and enhanced course offerings.
- Develop Advocacy Tools and Training: Work with organizations like JNCL-NCLIS to create advocacy tools, templates, and training for language program leaders. These tools can help departments effectively communicate their value and advocate for necessary support and resources.

By focusing on these action steps, you can help ensure that language education remains a vital and valued component of higher education, addressing current challenges and leveraging opportunities for growth and innovation. This will not only impact educational opportunities but will also create a national environment in which multilingualism is viewed as an asset.

What Will JNCL Do?

In addition to the dissemination of this report, JNCL-NCLIS will also begin to build advocacy tools and templates as well as host conversations with higher education groups alongside our members and partners in an effort to draw attention to the issues and the clear rationale behind comprehensive language education programs at IHEs. To support this work, JNCL-NCLIS will continue to raise discussions with legislators, decision makers, and leaders. JNCL-NCLIS and its national group of advocates and members will provide support to its member organizations for advocacy initiatives and amplify the work being done at the university level to catalyze change.

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