

MEMO

To: Council on Academic Affairs
From: Debra A. Reid, History
Re: Foreign Language Requirements
Date: Nov. 20, 2008

I would like to offer the following as additional “pros” for CAA members to consider when deciding whether or not to “rescind its approval of Agenda Item 08-35 April 17, 2008, that changes foreign language requirements for graduation.” I voted for this change then, and the following explains my reasons for remaining committed to it.

As the United States becomes more ethnically diverse and its position relative to other nations in the world shifts, foreign language instruction needs affirmation. No national standard exists; nor does the state of Illinois have a minimum requirement for foreign language instruction. Yet, foreign language instruction has been the topic of conversation in at least sixteen states which, as of February 2008, either had or were considering language requirements for public high school graduation [National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages - www.ncssfl.org/reports2/States%20with%20Foreign%20Language%20Requirements.doc].

Despite the lack of a statewide requirement for foreign language in Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has encouraged sequential foreign language instruction since 1986, beginning with second language instruction in early elementary school and culminating in advanced instruction at the high school level [ISBE, Foreign Languages Performance Descriptors, Intermediate-Advanced (2002), pg. 3; http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/foreign_languages/capd.htm].

Illinois Learning Standards for Foreign Language, available on the ISBE website, rationalize the benefits of studying a foreign language, and these bear repeating: “Research studies clearly indicate that studying another language may give students the ‘edge’ needed to succeed at higher levels in some other subjects. A study of over 17,000 students applying for college admission revealed that ‘students who had completed a foreign language course in high school tended to have higher scores on the ACT exams in English and math *regardless of their ability level*’ (Olsen & Brown 1992). It has also been verified that ‘high school foreign language students perform significantly better on the SAT verbal exam than non-foreign-language students, and that SAT verbal scores increase successively with each half year of foreign language study’ (*National Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, 1996) [http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/foreign_languages/standards.htm].

Chicago Public Schools have required all students to pass two years of foreign language to graduate from high school since 1999-2000. The Office of Language and Cultural Education, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), issued *High School World Languages Goals and Standards* in preparation for the field tests during 1999-2000. In it, the CPS summarized the rationale for the requirement: “The Chicago Public Schools affirm the value of proficiency and competency in languages and cultures in addition to English. Students who develop life skills in modern or classical languages are better prepared to understand themselves and others, negotiate needs and solve problems. They develop their capacity to

live and work successfully in multilingual, multicultural communities, both in Chicago and around the world” [pg. v, <http://intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Standards/CAS/wlgoals.pdf>]

As of 2005, the Illinois State Board of Education recognizes proficiency in American Sign Language as satisfying one year in a foreign language [<http://www.idhhc.state.il.us/ASL/Foreign-Language.htm>].

If EIU adopted the graduate requirement - “successful completion of three semesters of a single foreign language with an average grade of C or better” – many students would meet this requirement prior to admission to EIU, given the increased emphasis placed on foreign language instruction at the high school level. Phasing in the change over three years would provide time to alert high school guidance counselors and advisors at community colleges of the change. Thus, prospective students have the potential to prepare in advance.

Adopting a more rigorous foreign language requirement would also increase EIU’s academic requirements relative to its peer institutions, and make it more comparable to public research universities in Illinois. For this I base my argument on a list comparing state university foreign language admission and graduate requirements, “State University Foreign Language Requirements for Admission and Graduation,” (June 2007), posted on some township and school district websites: http://www.phs-il.org/pages/uploaded_files/State_Universities_Foreign_Language_Requirements_2007.pdf

Finally, EIU President Perry urges us to pursue “best in class” status. Making the foreign language graduate requirement more rigorous is one step toward accomplishing this “best in class” goal. It would indicate to prospective students of all ages that the university takes its goals of education and awareness related to global citizenship and cultural diversity seriously. It would continue to give EIU the edge in retention and graduation rates that help the university maintain its *U.S. News & World Report* ranking. It would also prepare alums to excel in their careers, including pursuit of graduate degrees. Finally, it could make a difference in EIU’s efforts to secure a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, thus becoming the first in its class in central Illinois to be awarded that honor. This is no small feat. Only 276 chapters exist in the nation. Chapters in Illinois currently include the following private and public institutions: (public) University of Illinois-Chicago, University of Illinois-Champaign/Urbana; (private): Augustana College, Illinois College, Illinois Wesleyan College, Northwestern University. EIU’s peer institutions do not have chapters.

Phi Beta Kappa is the oldest academic honor society in the United States. The society grants chapter status to faculty, but the society expects institutions hosting chapters to encourage excellence. Faculty at EIU have applied for chapter status at least twice, but have been denied for various reasons. Increasing the foreign language graduation requirement would address directly the second of five procedures that the society’s review committee assesses. Namely, they expect the host institution to “(2) make appropriate academic demands on those enrolled in its classes . . .” The committee expects that the institution’s undergraduate degrees help students comprehend the human condition and the reasoning process, make sense of the physical and moral worlds and of individual and group responsibility. These ideals can only be attained, according to Phi Beta Kappa, through a liberal arts and

sciences curriculum that includes the study of languages as well as literature, philosophy and religion, the fine arts, history, the social sciences, mathematics and the natural sciences. -
[http://www.pbk.org/infoview/PBK_infoView.aspx?t=&id=49]

I, as a member of EIU faculty, support increasing the foreign language graduate requirement. In my opinion, it presents clear evidence of the quest for academic excellence, which to me, translates into higher education. I also oppose rescinding the Spring 2008 CAA vote. I supported the proposal to increase requirements then, and I remain committed to that goal. I do not believe that the requirement will deter committed students, regardless of their age or previous college experience. Certainly, some may chose elsewhere, but a growing number of high school students already satisfying three years of foreign language study in high school will not be deterred. They will already have completed EIU's three semester graduation requirement. This will not slow them down at all in signing their acceptance paper. In fact, it may provide them additional incentive to come here.

I do not believe that the requirement to increase the number of semesters of foreign language study from two to three semesters for graduation will increase any student's length of residency. Many other things may contribute to extending their length of residency, but a clear graduate requirement will not do that. It may affect their choices of electives, but not ultimately their ability to graduate in a timely way. Phasing in the implementation of the requirement will reduce this threat that some believe this change poses.

Issues related to implementation must be addressed, but issues related to implementation should not derail this effort to increase EIU's academic goals. I urge creation of a task force to facilitate implementation of the three semester hour graduation requirement. This task force would collect hard data about non-traditional students and their ability to fulfill language requirements. The task force would further define what constitutes a foreign language (i.e. will EIU follow state law and allow American sign language to count?) and will determine whether statistics would satisfy the language requirement. These discussions should be held. Only by doing this can the concerns of EIU constituents who consider this requirement a "burden" be heard and addressed. These concerns should not be the reason for overturning a faculty-student vote that had the interests of EIU's students at heart.