

## In Defense of Preserving the Foreign Language Requirement

To the Monmouth College Faculty - May 1971

Change just for the sake of change is not progress, as we all know. And I suspect that the suggestion to drop the foreign language requirement has been precipitated by the disappointment of many students over the defeat of the so-called Thompson plan. Perhaps subconsciously, many of the faculty and administration who are proposing the destruction of this one requirement may simply hope to temporarily appease any angry murmurs by tossing in front of the restless ones this one murdered thing to prove their good intentions. At any rate, I have not heard one valid reason for dropping the requirement of a little exposure to some one language other than our own.

The fact that dropping this requirement would give more flexibility to the student's program is true. But it is no more applicable to removing the requirement of a foreign language than to removing the requirement of a science. But, you might say, in our scientific world, it is important for the student to know some chemistry or biology or geology. But actually, does the student have any more direct use for this knowledge than for a knowledge of language? The teacher, the business man, the housewife will be equipped for his or her daily life as well by having an understanding of language as he will by knowing that water is H<sub>2</sub>O.

Some of the science faculty, led by Mr. Peterson, objected to the Thompson plan primarily because it would allow some students to graduate with no college contact with a science. The elimination of the foreign language requirement would mean that many more would leave college with no contact of any kind with any other language except their own -- and they can get by with very little of that as language.

Another side effect of the elimination of this requirement is the loss of availability of language courses for those students who do want them. Of course, the language courses would be offered for next year, but the enrollments would be small. And in this period of financial crunch, a small class is considered expendable; and if there is not a large enough body count, the course will no longer be offered. This is a strange paradox in our age which is so enthusiastic about "protecting minorities."

One implication that I resent very much is that, as a teacher of Latin, I am a second-class (or maybe even a third-class) citizen in our academic community. Last year, Dean McKenna, before a faculty committee and in my presence, referred to my department as a "luxury" department. And several remarks by members of the Curriculum Committee the other day had this same undertone of insult. I want to state categorically that the study of language is no more of a luxury than the study of, say, philosophy or history or literature. All learning above the level of bare survival is, in a sense, a luxury.

The statement that not many students will find a need to use another language does not impress me because this is not the basic reason for such a study, certainly not in the language with which I am concerned. It is a fringe benefit. People who go abroad and people who do research in any field will find themselves handicapped without some facility in languages other than English. But for those who do not go anywhere or do any intellectual probing, this direct need for another language will not exist. However, as I said, this is not the basic reason for studying another language. What that reason is will, I hope, become clear as I go along.

At the Curriculum Committee meeting to which I was invited, the only other argument given for focusing all the heat on the foreign language requirement and destroying it was that the

school would attract more students without it. This is an unsubstantiated assumption, and I doubt that the facts would bear this out. But if we destroy this requirement and then find that we didn't accomplish what we had hoped by that deed, it is too late to undo it. [P.S. 1980 – The requirement was dropped, and we did not attract more students].

College should give enjoyment, but it must do more than that to justify its existence. And everything that helps us to express ourselves clearly and effectively I feel is essential in a college education, whether it is fun or not.

Of course, nothing is desirable solely on the basis that it has been traditional. But neither is it to be condemned just because it has been traditional. Everything should be allowed to exist on the basis of what it has to offer, whether it is old or new, and I think that what the study of a foreign language has to offer is important enough to justify its retention as a requirement. I feel that it is most important for all college students to be "exposed" to this area of learning, whether they want it or not, for at least in my own experience, I have found that not always are the things I think I need and the things I really need the same. And I must admit that sometimes things I need the most are the very things that I try the hardest to avoid.

I am convinced that one of the great deficiencies of this generation is its inability to communicate. This is because young people do not have a clear idea of the meaning of words, and they do not know how to fit them into groups that express complete ideas. Language is our most widely used means of communication, and whatever gives a better understanding of language is a valuable asset in any sociological situation. A comprehension of how language works is more valuable to the average college student than a comprehension of the basic structure of cells.

I am not talking about sitting down and memorizing a list of English words and rules of grammar. I am talking about learning how to manipulate the tools of language most efficiently to get the job of communicating accomplished. This is what I consider to be the intangible but most valuable contribution of the study of language. The ideal would be to study several languages, but I believe that all students need the bare minimum of exposure that we at present require, for I am convinced of the truth of a quotation that says: "A person who knows only his own language does not understand that language any more than a person who knows only his own religion understands that religion."

If a student has had this experience with language before he comes here, he can test out of the requirement right now; and if we have not seen to it that he has had this experience at some time before he leaves here, I feel that we are cheating him out of his right.