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NEW MLA REPORT HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED FOR INVESTMENT IN LANGUAGE STUDY: US COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WITH ROBUST SUPPORT FOR LANGUAGES MAINTAIN STRONG PROGRAMS DESPITE OVERALL DECLINE IN LANGUAGE ENROLLMENTS

Comprehensive nationwide census reveals increases in the study of Korean, American Sign Language, and Biblical Hebrew.

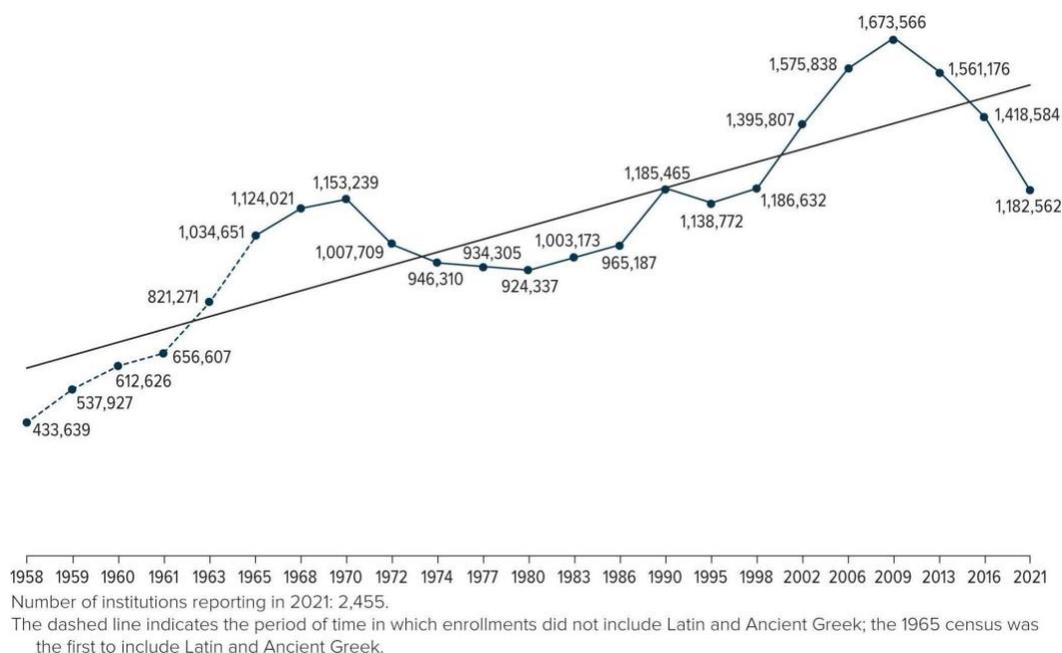
(New York, NY) Many language programs at US colleges and universities remain strong despite challenging national and local conditions, according to a comprehensive new report, *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2021*, released today by the Modern Language Association (MLA). While total enrollments in languages other than English continued the sustained decline that began after the historic peak in 2009, more than one-third of all language programs saw an increase in enrollments or remained stable, and several languages showed gains in overall enrollments.

The MLA report is the longest-running comprehensive analysis of the study of world languages at US colleges and universities; this is the twenty-sixth survey in the series. The report includes undergraduate and graduate course enrollments in languages other than English in fall 2021 for 2,455 AA-, BA-, MA-, and PhD-granting colleges and universities in the United States, or 92.2% of all eligible institutions. This response rate is lower than the census's peak rate of 95% or higher, but it remains an exceptionally high number, qualifying the report as a census rather than a survey. Partial funding for the report came from the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the United States Department of Education.

Total language enrollments on US college campuses decreased by 16.6% between 2016 and 2021, marking the largest decline in the history of the census. From 1980 until 2009, the year immediately following the 2007–08 financial crisis, language enrollments at US colleges and universities saw strong growth, rising from 924,337 in 1980 to 1,673,566 in 2009 (see fig. 1a). Enrollments now stand at approximately the same level as in 1998. Part, but not all, of this drop in language enrollments can be attributed to the overall decrease in the number of students enrolling in colleges and universities, as institutions have seen an 8.0% decline in enrollment since 2016.

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Fig. 1a: Fall Language Enrollments by Year



The drop in enrollments was steepest at two-year institutions, falling by 24.2%; enrollments at four-year institutions declined by 14.7%. This disparity has concerning implications for equity of and access to language study; the two-year institutions whose programs are disproportionately at risk provide critical educational opportunities for underserved communities of students.

Despite these challenging conditions for language study, many language programs continue to flourish. Among all programs and for all languages, 38.3% increased or were stable. The percentage of programs that increased or were stable was even greater for advanced undergraduate study (50.0%) and graduate study (56.5%). Moreover, three of the fifteen most commonly taught languages saw an overall increase in enrollments. Korean continued its remarkable growth, rising by 38.3%, followed by Biblical Hebrew (9.1%) and American Sign Language (0.8%).

The report includes case studies of ten institutions from across the country where language programs are thriving. Many of these institutions achieved remarkable growth over the past several years, and instructors and administrators share how their approaches to language learning have enabled their programs to flourish. What works? Access to robust institutional and financial support, the development of close ties between language programs and local communities, an emphasis on real-life language application and professional advancement, and courses that highlight the cultural component of language learning. “In a difficult time for language study, it is vital that we learn from these extraordinary success stories,” said Paula M. Krebs, the executive director of the MLA. “These strong programs offer valuable strategies for institutions with struggling programs, and they speak to how transformative full-throated institutional support can be for language learning.”

Data from this census are also being added to the [MLA Language Map](#), where visitors can view language programs and enrollments in the context of where languages are spoken in the United States. Researchers who want to find out more about enrollments over time and to search by state or institution will be able to create custom reports in the [Language Enrollment Database, 1958–2021](#).

Key Findings of the Report

Following are some of the key findings of *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States*

Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2021:

- Total college and university enrollments in languages other than English dropped by 16.6% between fall 2016 and fall 2021.
- The total number of programs of study reporting enrollments fell by 961, an 8.2% drop. These numbers do not represent closed departments; rather, they reflect the reduction in the aggregate number of institutions that report a given language in a given year.
- Between fall 2016 and fall 2021, enrollments increased in Korean (38.3%), Biblical Hebrew (9.1%), and American Sign Language (0.8%).
- In 2021, 44 more institutions reported enrollments in American Sign Language than did in 2016, and 29 more institutions reported enrollments in Korean.
- The most successful language programs had several key characteristics in common, including ample funding, support from administrative offices and other departments, a willingness to prioritize studying the cultural component of language, and a focus on applying language learning in real-life contexts.
- Spanish and French still led as the two most studied languages, and American Sign Language continued to hold third place, but other shifts in the most commonly taught languages reflect a growing diversity in the languages students are pursuing. Japanese has taken German's place as the language with the fourth most enrollments. Chinese/Mandarin has moved ahead of Italian, and Korean has advanced above Russian.
- The top languages studied in US colleges and universities in fall 2021 were

Language	Enrollments	Change since 2016
Spanish	584,453	-18.0%
French	135,088	-23.1%
American Sign Language	107,899	+0.8%
Japanese	65,661	-4.6%
German	53,543	-33.6%
Chinese/Mandarin	46,492	-14.3%
Italian	45,182	-20.4%
Arabic	22,918	-27.4%
Latin	19,472	-21.5%
Korean	19,270	+38.3%
Russian	17,598	-13.5%
Greek, Ancient	11,433	-13.8%
Hebrew, Biblical	10,442	+9.1%
Portuguese	7,684	-21.8%
Hebrew, Modern	4,125	-26.0%

- Course offerings for less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) continued to be somewhat irregular. While enrollments in the aggregated LCTLs declined significantly less (6.8%) than enrollments in languages as a whole, 101 LCTLs saw a decline in the number of institutions where they were taught, and 20 Indigenous American languages that were taught in 2013 or 2016 were not taught in 2021. However, also among the LCTLs, 113 languages experienced an increase in the number of institutions where they were taught.

“In the current professional and cultural climate, we can't afford to devalue the study of languages,” said Krebs. “The world is increasingly interconnected, and the need for knowledge of languages other than English is even more important. Institutions of higher education have an obligation to both prepare their students for their future careers and create well-informed citizens. If they are going to fulfill these obligations, they have to prioritize investing in and supporting language education.”

Methodology

The new MLA census counts fall 2021 undergraduate and graduate course enrollments in languages other than English at 2,455 AA-, BA-, MA-, and PhD-granting colleges and universities in the United States. The response rate for the census was 92.2%. Approximately one-third of the responses came from two-year institutions, and two-thirds from four-year institutions.

To conduct the census, the MLA contacted registrars and other school representatives by email and telephone. The MLA listing of institutions was supplemented with information from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Higher Education Directory, among other sources, to ensure that all eligible institutions were accounted for. The census measures course enrollments, not the number of students studying a language.

About the Modern Language Association

The Modern Language Association and its members work to strengthen the study and teaching of languages and literatures. Founded in 1883, the MLA provides opportunities for its members to share their scholarly findings and teaching experiences with colleagues and to discuss trends in the academy. The MLA sustains a wide-ranging print and electronic publishing program that includes books, journals, style guides, and an international bibliography. More information on MLA programs is available at www.mla.org.