Snapshot: Language Study in Fall 2020

Between 2016 and 2020, total enrollments (undergraduate and graduate) in languages other than English dropped by 15.4%, according to the MLA's sample survey of enrollments in fall 2020.

Since 1958, the MLA has gathered and analyzed data on undergraduate and graduate course enrollments in languages other than English in United States colleges and universities. Because of the pandemic, the MLA postponed its full language enrollment census to fall 2021. But to get a sense of the state of language enrollments in the first year of the pandemic, we conducted a sample survey—a "snapshot"—of enrollments in fall 2020. There were 1,308 institutions in the snapshot compared with 2,547 institutions included in the previous census, conducted in 2016. Enrollment figures for 2020 were gathered from institutional websites. We included in the snapshot

only those institutions for which we had enrollments for both 2016 and 2020.

It is important to note that enrollments represent course enrollments and not students.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The 15.4% decline was the largest decrease in enrollments we've seen since the beginning of the census. Language enrollments had been steadily increasing between 1995 and 2009, when language enrollments peaked at 1,673,566, but have seen declines since 2009.

Spanish and French still lead as the two most studied languages (see fig. 1). American Sign Language continues to be third, having displaced German in 2013. In 2020, overall language enrollments showed great variability, from a 25.4% increase in Korean to a 32.2% decrease

in German, reflecting greater upheaval in enrollments than in previous years. Three of the fifteen most commonly taught languages in 2016 showed gains in enrollments in 2020: in addition to Korean, they are American Sign Language (4.6%) and Biblical Hebrew (10.3%). The aggregated less commonly taught languages also grew, showing a gain of 12.4%.

Notably among the less commonly taught languages, Hawai'ian did very well, increasing 24.1% to above 2,000 enrollments and becoming the first Indigenous language among the fifteen most commonly taught languages.

Although language enrollments dropped at a higher rate at two-year institutions than at four-year institutions, declines in language enrollments at two-year institutions mirrored declines in overall enrollments at these schools. At two-year institutions, language enroll-

Language	2016	2020	#Change	%Change
Spanish	464,966	394,170	-70,796	-15.2%
French	115,032	89,321	-25,711	-22.4%
American Sign Language (ASL)	65,595	68,590	2,995	4.6%
Japanese	46,936	43,268	-3,668	-7.8%
German	55,785	37,819	-17,966	-32.2%
Chinese	33,561	26,528	-7,033	-21.0%
Italian	34,549	26,116	-8,433	-24.4%
Arabic (all)	20,876	15,167	-5,709	-27.3%
Latin	16,476	12,955	-3,521	-21.4%
Korean	9,033	11,323	2,290	25.4%
Russian	13,740	10,434	-3,306	-24.1%
Greek, Ancient (all)	5,640	5,468	-172	-3.0%
Portuguese	6,288	5,105	-1,183	-18.8%
Hebrew, Modern	2,639	2,329	-310	-11.7%
Hawai'ian	1,696	2,104	408	24.1%
Hebrew, Biblical (all)	1,828	2,017	189	10.3%
All Languages	912,829	772,150	-140,679	-15.4%

FIGURE 1. Commonly Taught Languages in Order of 2020 Enrollments

ments dropped 17.2% between 2016 and 2020, compared with a 15.7% decline in overall student enrollments for these institutions reported by the National Student Clearinghouse (fig. 2). In contrast, language enrollments at four-year public and private nonprofit institutions decreased disproportionately, declining by 15.0% while overall student enrollments declined by only 0.4%. Looking at the entire picture, the 15.4% decline in language enrollments at all institutions far exceeded the 5.4% drop in overall student enrollments.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The snapshot figures represent language enrollments at the height of the pandemic. The MLA's full census of language enrollments covering fall 2021 is currently ongoing, and we anticipate having a better picture of how recent enrollment numbers fit into longer-term patterns.

For ideas about how to support language study on your campus, we encourage you to view the models included in *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Summer 2016 and Fall 2016: Final Report* (www.mla.org/Enrollment-Report). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) also has a wealth of materials on the importance of language study at www.leadwithlanguages.org. And use these *ADFL Bulletin* articles when talking with students and advocating for your program with administrators (log-in needed):

Bousquet, Gilles, et al. "Career Trajectories of World Language Graduates: A *LinkedIn* Perspective." *ADFL Bulletin*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2019, pp. 27–42, https://doi.org/10.1632/adfl.45.2.27.

Duggan, Anne E., and Elena Past. "A (Relatively) Successful Campaign to Protect the Foreign Language Requirement." *ADFL Bulletin*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, pp. 123–33, https://doi.org/10.1632/adfl.46.1.123.

Wurst, Karin. "Foreign Languages Study as Advanced Competencies and Career Preparation." *ADFL Bulletin*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2021, pp. 79–92, https://doi.org/10.1632/adfl.46.2.79.
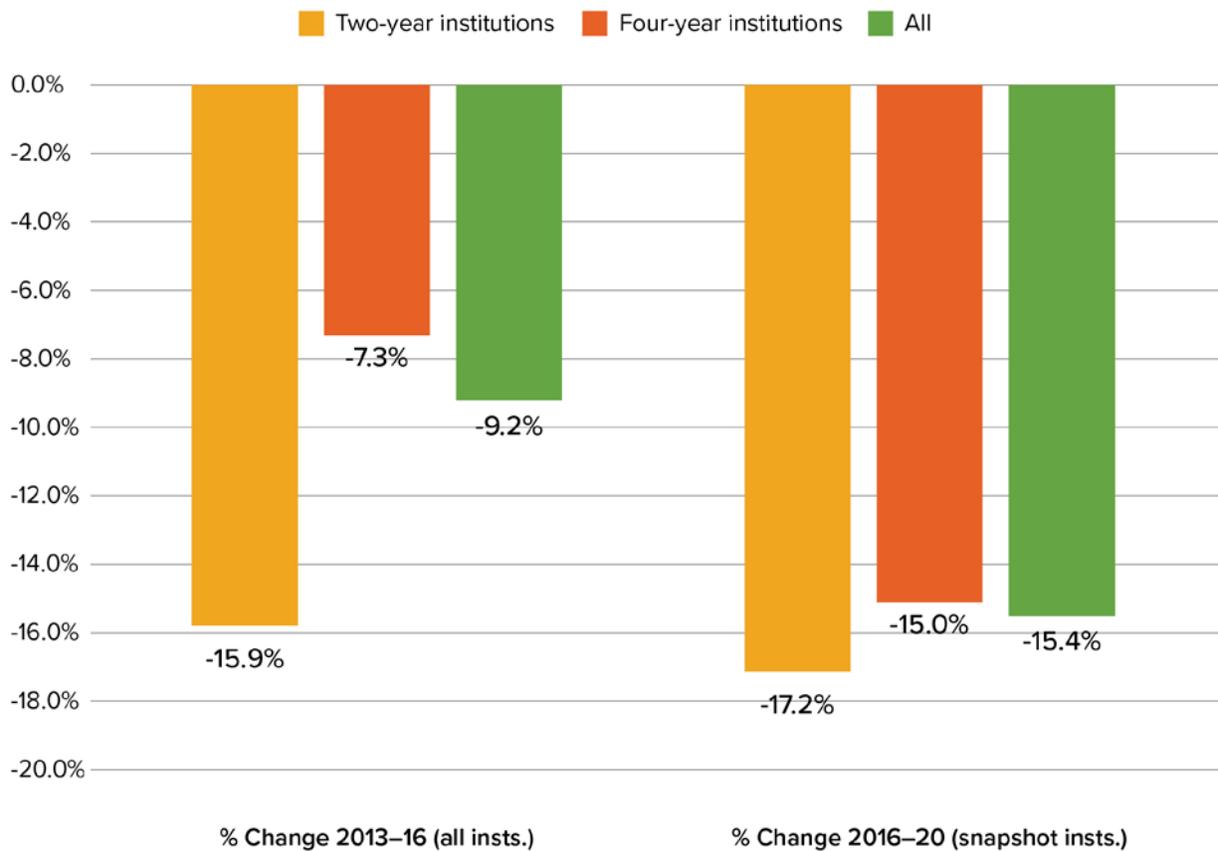
FIGURE 2. How Enrollments Changed in 2016–20

Sources: "Table 1: Estimated National Enrollment by Sector" (*Current Term Enrollment Estimates, Fall 2016*; National Student Clearinghouse, 2016, p. 3, nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollment-Fall2016.pdf); "Table 1: Estimated National Enrollment by Institutional Sector: 2018 to 2020" (*Current Term Enrollment Estimates, Fall 2020*; National Student Clearinghouse, 2020, p. 4, nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf).