Faculty Senate Executive Committee

Rescind 3-year foreign language requirement change passed by Senate May 2000, reverting to prior 2-year foreign language requirement

Approved by the Executive Committee 07/28/03
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July 28, 2003
Report on the Foreign Language Requirement

Background

In May, 2000 the Faculty Senate approved a recommendation by the Core Curriculum Review Committee to require that students graduating from Texas A&M have either three years of the same foreign language in high school or two semesters of college credit, beginning in Fall 2003. This replaced a requirement that specified two years in high school. This rule was approved by the Provost and President in June, 2000.

Subsequently, high school counselors were notified of the new equivalency rule. The extent to which they informed students is unknown. The members of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee (EC) have been told that most schools in Texas do not offer three years of a language, but this information is apparently not verifiable. Currently we are the only university in the state that requires more than two years in high school.

During this year’s New Student Conferences it was discovered that approximately one-third of the enrolling freshmen (about 2,250 students) do not meet the three-year rule, and will be required to either (1) take two semesters of language in college, or (2) pass the equivalency examination. Historically, about the pass rate on this exam is about 28%, but only a few students actually attempt it.

At the time the Senate passed the three-year rule, it was anticipated that (1) many high schools would respond by adding a third year to their curricula, (2) Texas A&M would continue to offer first-year language courses at the same level, and (3) Blinn College could handle any surplus. In fact, none of these occurred, leading to the current problems. High schools have apparently not increased their language offering. The proportion of students without three years of high school language has declined somewhat, but not significantly, from last year. The Department of Modern Languages has stated its intention to reduce the number of Spanish 101/102 sections it offers. In the 2003 fall semester there are 363 seats available (54 of these are Honors). Blinn administrators have said they will probably not be able to handle the overload.

At the Faculty Senate meeting on July 14, 2003 several senators asked that the Executive Committee investigate these problems and consider a moratorium on application of the rule. The EC members interviewed a number of interested parties and heard from Associate Provost Mark Weichold and Senator Evelyn Castiglioni on July 28, 2003.

On the question of rescinding the three-year foreign language graduation requirement, the EC voted 5-2 (2 members absent) to recommend to the full Senate that the requirement be returned to two years of high school language or one year in university because the three-year requirement is unworkable at the present time. This item will be put on the August 11, 2003 Faculty Senate agenda.

Since the EC members were not in accord on this decision, the Speaker asked that a majority and a minority report be presented to the Senate in advance of the meeting. Those reports follow.
Majority Report

Senators voting to rescind the three-year equivalency rule and revert to the two-year rule cited the following as the bases for their decision.

The reason that the three-year rule was a graduation requirement, rather than a core curriculum requirement, was that the faculty agreed that certain skills are better provided by high schools than universities. It was assumed that our new rule would encourage students to satisfy the requirement in high school, and encourage high schools to offer three years, if they did not already do so. The proportion of students entering in the fall of 2003 with three years of language was not appreciably greater than the number in 2002 under the two-year rule. We conclude from this that either (1) many high schools are not offering three years of language, (2) students are ignorant of the new rule, or (3) students have deliberately chosen to meet the requirement by taking the equivalency test or the course for college credit. We suspect that it is some unknown combination of these factors. Furthermore, we have no assurance, or even reason to expect, that the proportion of deficient students will decline in the future.

We have had correspondence from a professional student advisor at TAMU who asserts the following, which is fairly typical of the view of student advisors in many of the colleges:

The counselors of local high schools were not told about the change until the beginning of the students’ senior year. Just three years ago when these students were freshmen in high school the language requirement for TAMU was zero (catalog 122). I have met with two incoming freshman groups (about 370 students) already this summer for registration and half of the students and parents say they were never informed.

In all the website information from our admission office, the three credits are not mentioned. The frequently asked questions say two credits of foreign language are required for admission. Only in catalog 125 (printed in June 2002) did the new requirement appear for the first time in print. It states, "For students enrolling in the Fall 2003 and thereafter, three credits of high school work in the same foreign language will be required."

Regardless of the reason for the large number of freshmen with a deficiency in the language requirement, the fact that they exist creates many problems. Therefore, we conclude the following:

- Students who deliberately took only two years (by design or because there was no third year offered) are entering the University with the expectation that they can take a language course here or at Blinn. Fairness demands that if we have an extraordinary requirement that creates additional demand for courses, we should ensure that an adequate supply exists in Bryan/College Station. Charles Johnson, Dean of Liberal Arts, has told us that the Modern Language Department does not have the resources to add additional 101/102 sections, either now or in the future.
- If TAMU continues its course offerings at the current level, and Blinn is able to increase its Spring ’04 seats by 30%, we project that there will be a need for 30 additional sections (about 700 students) to serve the students in the incoming freshman class. If next year’s freshman class has deficient students, the problem will compound each year.
- As a result of the shortage of offerings at TAMU and Blinn, many students will be forced to take the courses at their local community colleges in the summer (which will certainly be a problem for B/CS residents). Many of our students need to stay in residence to take summer classes here, some have summer internships, and many must work at home to help pay for their education.
A tuition rebate of $1,000 is available to students who graduate with no more than three credit hours above their degree plan. Students who have to take the college course (and many of those who pass the equivalency exam) will automatically fail to qualify. We believe that this creates an undue hardship on students and parents, at a time when their anticipated tuition costs are increasing due to budget cuts. We doubt that many students or parents have realized this fact, but when they do, there are going to be a lot of unhappy people.

While it is not a sufficient reason to justify a decision to reduce our current graduation requirements, we believe that there are potentially harmful public relations problems associated with our previous decision. The Senate acted in good faith, and made a good decision from an educational standpoint, but it did not have any knowledge of the events that would conspire to create the problems that now exist. If the University fails to remedy these problems by retaining the rule and not providing adequate course offerings, we open ourselves to a great deal of criticism from families and the press.

It has been alleged that if the Faculty Senate rescinds the rule, it will appear irresolute or willing to compromise solid education standards in the face of student/parent pressure. We argue that rescinding the rule is in the best interest of students, parents, the Senate and the University. We must never fail to act because we fear admitting that we made a decision which, based on new information, was flawed.

In summary, we believe that proficiency in a foreign language is a skill that is highly desirable, even essential, for our students who will be working in a global environment. However, it is irresponsible for us to impose graduation requirements without supplying the means for our students to meet them, thereby creating significant hardships. Ideally, the President and the Provost would overrule a decision by the Senate to rescind the rule, and find the resources to add adequate sections of language to our future course offerings. However, we think that is unlikely in today’s financial environment.

Looking at the bigger picture, one EC member has noted that one year of college language or its equivalent, doesn’t even come close to the concept of proficiency. Perhaps the faculty should carefully reconsider what its original goal was, and whether or not requiring the equivalent of one year of college language actually adds value to our students’ educations. The Core Curriculum Assessment Task Force, currently being formed by the EC, may be an appropriate mechanism to revisit this issue.
Minority Report

The Majority Report covers the background of this issue well, and we will not repeat it. We must, however, respectfully disagree with their conclusion.

Most of the majority concede that our students will increasingly need proficiency in one or more foreign languages as they proceed in their lives and careers. They will also concede that a requirement for three years of a foreign language, while not a perfect solution, is far better than a two-year requirement.

Texas A&M was among the leaders in adopting the requirement for three years of foreign language, beginning with the Class of 2007. Now that the time for implementing that requirement is at hand, we are counseled to retreat from our position of leadership. The justifications are several; taken as a whole, they amount to a lack of planning (and foresight) on the part of those charged with that implementation, and particularly on the part of those charged with providing the resources for doing so.

The recommendation of the majority is, in essence, one of expediency. Because the university did not determine the extent to which high schools offer two years of language, because the university did not adequately inform high school counselors and prospective students of the new requirement, and because the department responsible for offering the required courses is not sufficiently funded, we are told that we must abandon the requirement.

We believe that it is important to strengthen the Core Curriculum, not weaken it; that Texas A&M should be a leader in this matter, not a follower; and that the Faculty Senate should expect the administration to make good on their commitments in the area of curriculum, especially when they have had several years in which to get ready.

If the situation for the coming Fall is desperate (and we are by no means so convinced), then we would support a one-year moratorium on the enforcement of the rule.

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