



More College Students Studying Foreign Languages Than Ever Before, Says New Study by the Modern Language Association

**20th Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Finds
Greatest-Ever Variety of Languages Being Taught,
with Spanish Continuing to Be the Most Commonly Studied**

**Largest Percentage Increases in
Arabic, Biblical Hebrew, and American Sign Language**

The Modern Language Association (MLA) survey of 2002 *Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002*, funded by the Department of Education, found that more students are studying foreign languages than ever before and that the variety of languages being taught is greater than ever before.

“Students are clearly recognizing the importance of learning other languages as we become a more global society,” said Rosemary G. Feal, Executive Director of the MLA. “Studying foreign languages allows for a greater understanding of other cultures and ways of thinking.”

Since 1998--the last time the survey was published--the number of students studying foreign languages in U.S. institutions of higher education increased by 17.9%, from 1,193,830 in 1998 to 1,407,440 in 2002. This is the highest total number of students studying foreign languages recorded since the first MLA survey was released, in 1958, and is greater than the general increase in undergraduate enrollments of 7.5% since 1998. The percentage of students studying foreign languages is 8.7%--the highest it has been since 1972.

In addition, 148 less commonly taught languages were being studied in 2002, versus 137 in 1998--an increase of 8% and a greater variety of languages than ever before. Of these less commonly taught languages, 35 are indigenous to Europe, 37 are indigenous to the Middle East or Africa, 41 are indigenous to Asia or the Pacific, and 35 are indigenous to North or South America. Among these languages, the most taught are spoken by American heritage communities. These include Hawai’ian, Hindi, Modern Greek, Navajo, Persian, Polish, Swahili, and Vietnamese.

The largest percentage increases in foreign language enrollments since 1998 are in American Sign Language (ASL), Arabic, and biblical Hebrew. In 2002 more than 60,000 students registered for ASL, a 432% increase since 1998. (This increase can be attributed in part to the survey’s data-gathering procedure. Instead of being classified with “other languages,” this year ASL was listed specifically, prompting 234 institutions to include ASL when they hadn’t previously. Nevertheless, 186 ASL programs are reported as having come into existence since the 1998 survey, indicating extraordinary growth.) Arabic enrollments increased by 92.5% since 1998 (from 5,505 to 10,596),

moving from the fourteenth position of most commonly taught languages to the twelfth. Biblical Hebrew enrollments increased by 59% (from 9,099 to 14,469), becoming eleventh among the most commonly taught languages.

Trends in Language Enrollments – Since 1970 Spanish has been the most widely taught language in colleges and universities, accounting for more than half (53%) of the total foreign language enrollments in 2002. “While Spanish is usually taught as a foreign language in the United States, it is, in fact, the first language of many Americans,” said Feal. “Increasingly, knowing another language is an asset for communicating effectively in the workplace and in the culture at large.”

After multiyear declines, enrollments in French have stabilized and enrollments in German have grown by 12.5%. Between 1970 and 2002 Japanese increased by nearly eight times and Chinese increased almost five and a half times. Russian has been stable since the survey of 1998 after showing great variability, declining steeply in the 1970s and 1990s but growing during the 1960s and 1980s.

15 Most Commonly Taught Languages– Following Spanish, French, and German, the most commonly taught languages in the U.S. are Italian, American Sign Language, Japanese, Chinese, Latin, Russian, Ancient Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Arabic, Modern Hebrew, Portuguese, and Korean. For the first time since 1968 all of these languages showed increases in enrollment. (Exact numbers can be seen in Table 1a on the following page of this press release.)

Regional Differences– The study of Italian and Hebrew resides primarily in the Northeast; the study of Asian languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese is primarily on the Pacific Coast; and the study of Spanish and Arabic is fairly evenly distributed nationally.

Survey Methodology and Response Rate The MLA sent a questionnaire to the registrars of 2,780 two- and four-year institutions, soliciting information on credit-bearing registrations for fall 2002 in all language courses other than English. All but 13 of the institutions, or 99.53%, responded, for the highest response rate in the history of MLA’s enrollment surveys. Survey participants responded either via the web (28.7%), a return postcard (50.9%) or a follow-up phone call (20.4%).

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A draft copy of the Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002 report in pdf format is available on request from adfl@mla.org. The report of the full survey will appear in the Winter 2004 issue of the ADFL Bulletin.

Table 1a
Fall 1998 and 2002 Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education
(Languages in Descending Order of 2002 Totals)

Language	1998	2002	% Change
Spanish	656,590	746,602	13.7
French	199,064	202,014	1.5
German	89,020	100,112	12.5
Italian	49,287	63,866	29.6
American Sign Language	11,420	60,849	432.8
Japanese	43,141	52,238	21.1
Chinese	28,456	34,153	20.0
Latin	26,145	29,835	14.1
Russian	23,791	23,916	0.5
Ancient Greek	16,402	20,858	27.2
Biblical Hebrew	9,099	14,469	59.0
Arabic	5,505	10,596	92.5
Modern Hebrew	6,734	8,619	28.0
Portuguese	6,926	8,385	21.1
Korean	4,479	5,211	16.3
Other languages	17,771	25,717	44.7
Total	1,193,830	1,407,440	17.9