

# The MLA Survey of Postsecondary Entrance and Degree Requirements for Languages Other Than English, 2009–10

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# The MLA Survey of Postsecondary Entrance and Degree Requirements for Languages Other Than English, 2009–10

SINCE 1953, the MLA has conducted a survey of entrance and degree requirements for languages other than English. The surveys reveal trends over time and show how colleges and universities in the United States have added, dropped, or changed their requirements. Entrance and degree requirements are one measure of the value that an institution attaches to language study.

In past surveys, the MLA asked simply: “For entrance or to receive a baccalaureate degree is there a language requirement?” To gain a better understanding of institutions’ language requirements, for the two most recent surveys in the series, we have sought more information: “Is a language other than English required, not required, or recommended? Or is language study one option among several in a distribution requirement?” The nature of distribution requirements varies by institution. Some institutions have traditional categories from which to choose (humanities, math and science, social sciences); others categorize distribution requirements by themes, such as cross-cultural perspectives or science and society, and still others by areas of competency (exploration, critical thinking, problem solving).

## Baccalaureate Degree Requirements

The percentage of four-year colleges and universities in the United States that require baccalaureate students to take courses in a language other than English to graduate has dropped in the last decade and a half. In 2009–10, 50.7% of institutions had a language requirement for the baccalaureate, a decline of almost 17 percentage points from 1994–95, when 67.5% of institutions had a requirement (see [fig. 1](#)). The shift away from course requirements was largely toward choices within distribution requirements: in 1994–95, languages other than English were an option in the distribution requirement at 16.9% of institutions; in 2009–10, they were an option at 32.0%, an increase of 15.1 percentage points. The percentage of institutions without either a language requirement or a distribution requirement including language study rose only slightly in that time span, from 15.6% to 17.3% (see [table 1](#)).

## Undergraduate Entrance Requirements

Entrance requirements present a different picture: the percentage of four-year institutions that require previous study of a language other than English for acceptance to an institution’s baccalaureate degree programs rose by 4 percentage points between 1994–95 and 2009–10, from 20.7% to 24.7%. Entrance requirements are in the

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process of a steady recovery from a steep decline: between 1965–66 and 1982–83, the percentage of institutions requiring a language other than English for entrance fell almost 20 percentage points, from 33.6% to a historic low of 14.1% (see [table 1](#)).

When viewed in historical perspective, the current numbers appear in a different light. A 1955 MLA report on requirements showed that in 1913, modern foreign language entrance requirements existed at approximately 89% of institutions. Although the percentage fell to 70% in 1922, these percentages are still remarkable when compared to the 24.7% figure for 2009–10: the place of language in higher education in recent decades is radically different from the place it held a century ago (McKown).

### Length of Degree Requirement

Length of requirements for all baccalaureate degrees (BS and BA) varies by institution: almost half the institutions that have a requirement call for two semesters of study, while 23.7% require four semesters. For BA students, however, the expectations are higher: 30.0% of institutions have a two-semester requirement, and 40.0% have a four-semester requirement. (Entrance requirements, in contrast, overwhelmingly specify a four-semester requirement [see [tables 2a](#), [2b](#), and [2c](#)].) For all baccalaureate degrees, some institutions specify that the language courses must be at least at the intermediate level or that all the courses must be in the same language.

Instead of course work, the language requirement—for both entrance to an institution and attainment of a degree—can usually be fulfilled by a proficiency or placement exam, through study abroad, or by virtue of being a native speaker of a language other than English.

### Methodology

The 2009–10 survey of entrance and degree requirements is the MLA's thirteenth survey on requirements, the first since 1994–95, and the first that is a sample survey. In this sample survey, associate degree-granting institutions, specialized and military institutions, tribal colleges, and institutions that granted no degrees in languages other than English were not included. Selected for inclusion in the population from which the sample was drawn were 1,358 public and private not-for-profit baccalaureate-, master's-, and doctorate-granting institutions in the United States with enrollments of at least 400 students; they were chosen from the United States Department of Education's database of postsecondary institutions. A random sample of 150 institutions, stratified by institution size, type, control, and geographic region, was taken from this population (see [tables 3](#), [4](#), and [5](#)).

### Concluding Observations

While language study entrance and degree requirements followed parallel paths until the mid-1990s, in 2009–10 entrance requirements show modest gains, whereas degree requirements registered a substantial drop of nearly 17%.

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The study of languages other than English has to be placed in the context of changes in the wider educational landscape that influence students' choices and options: broadened choice of courses in distribution requirements, developments of new fields of study within colleges of arts and sciences, and the growth of baccalaureate degree programs outside colleges of arts and sciences, where languages have been strongest historically.

Beyond entrance and degree requirements, institutions can implement other measures—such as study-abroad programs, courses for heritage speakers, and language-related service learning—to enrich students' language experience.

Language learning develops cognitive and analytic abilities and improves sensitivity to cultural differences and awareness of one's linguistic and cultural particularities. As with any field of knowledge, to reach an operative level of competency, language learning demands practice over time. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English are part of many disciplines; expanding these abilities in another language throughout the educational system can only benefit students. At a time when preparing American students for work in a global environment is a mandate of higher education, learning a language other than English must become a core subject matter in many undergraduate fields of study.

### Note

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### Work Cited

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- McKown, Harry C. "The Trend of College Entrance Requirements, 1913–1922." *Bulletin* 35 (1924): 73. Qtd. in "Foreign Language Entrance and Degree Requirements." *PMLA* 68.4, pt. 2, supp. (1953): 40. Web. JSTOR. 27 Dec. 2011.

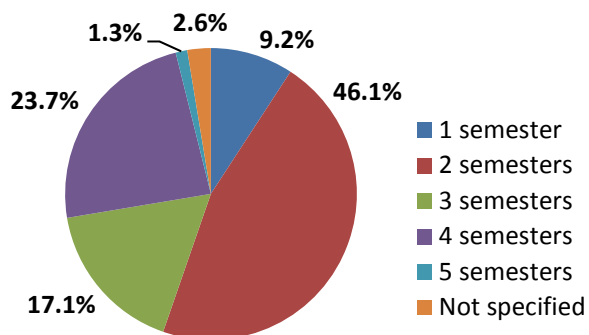
**Table 1**  
**Entrance and Degree Requirements for Study of a Language Other Than English in**  
**Four-Year Institutions, by Year**

Survey Year	Language Study	For Entrance (%)	For Degree (%)
2009–10	Required	24.7	50.7
	Recommended	38.0	
	Option in distribution requirement	7.3	32.0
	Not required, recommended, or part of distribution requirement	30.0	17.3
(Institution sample: 150 out of a universe of 1,358)			
1994–95	Required	20.7	67.5
	Recommended	6.3	
	Option in distribution requirement		16.9
	Not required, recommended, or part of distribution requirement	73.0	15.6
(Number of institutions: 1,607)			
1987–88	Required	20.3	58.1
	Recommended	5.5	
	Not required or recommended	74.2	41.9
(Number of institutions: 1,481)			
1982–83	Required	14.1	47.4
	Not required	83.9	52.6
(Number of institutions: 1,260)			
1974–75	Required	18.6	53.2
	Not required	81.4	46.8
(Number of institutions: 1,285)			
1970–71	Required	27.4	76.7
	Not required	72.6	23.3
(Number of institutions: 1,206)			
1965–66	Required	33.6	88.9
	Not required	66.4	11.2
(Number of institutions: 1,158)			

**Table 2a**  
**Length of Degree Requirements—All Students, 2009–10**

Number of semesters	Percentage of institutions
1 semester	9.2
2 semesters	46.1
3 semesters	17.1
4 semesters	23.7
5 semesters	1.3
Not specified	2.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0</b>

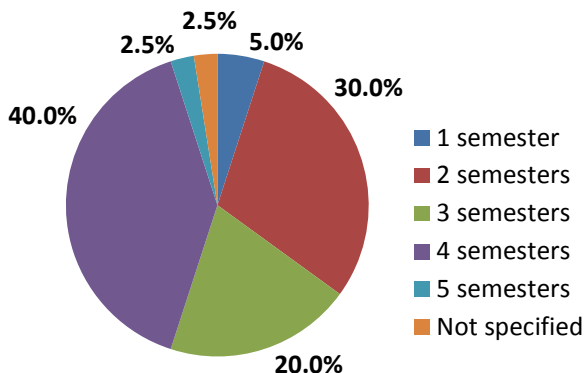
Note: Total represents 76 institutions, or 50.7% of the sample.



**Table 2b**  
**Length of Degree Requirements—BA Students, 2009–10**

Number of semesters	Percentage of institutions
1 semester	5.0
2 semesters	30.0
3 semesters	20.0
4 semesters	40.0
5 semesters	2.5
Not specified	2.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0</b>

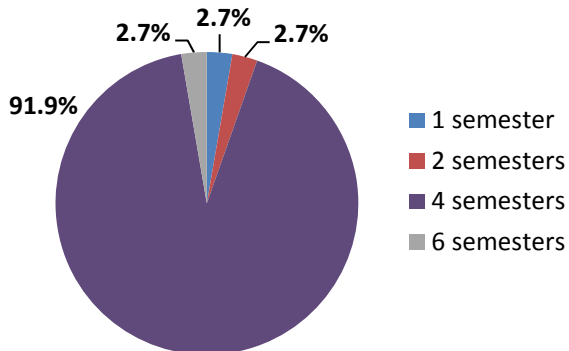
Note: Total represents 40 institutions, or 26.7% of the sample.



**Table 2c**  
**Length of Entrance Requirements—All Students, 2009–10**

Number of semesters	Percentage of institutions
1 semester	2.7
2 semesters	2.7
4 semesters	91.9
6 semesters	2.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Total represents 37 institutions, or 24.7% of the sample.



**Table 3**  
**Entrance Requirements for Study of a Language Other Than English in Four-Year Institutions, by Institutional Characteristics, 2009–10**

	Required	Recommended	Part of Distribution Requirement	Other	Total
<b>Control</b>					
Public	42.6	22.2	18.5	16.7	100.0
Private not-for-profit	14.6	46.9	1.0	37.5	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>38.0</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Size</b>					
999 or fewer	13.0	34.8	4.3	47.8	100.0
1,000–2,999	13.6	49.2	1.7	35.6	100.0
3,000–9,999	31.0	28.6	16.7	23.8	100.0
10,000 or more	50.0	30.8	7.7	11.5	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>38.0</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Institutional type</b>					
Doctorate	37.5	31.3	9.4	21.9	100.0
Master's	29.0	27.4	11.3	32.3	100.0
Baccalaureate	12.5	53.6	1.8	32.1	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>38.0</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Region*</b>					
Northeast	12.1	48.5	6.1	33.3	100.0
South Atlantic	46.2	35.9	2.6	15.4	100.0
South Central	33.3	26.7	26.7	13.3	100.0
Midwest	13.6	40.9	2.3	43.2	100.0
Rocky Mountain	12.5	25.0	37.5	25.0	100.0
Pacific Coast	27.3	27.3	0.0	45.5	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>38.0</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*States included in each region:

Northeast: CT, DE, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT

South Atlantic: AL, DC, FL, GA, KY, MD, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV

South Central: AR, LA, MS, OK, TX

Midwest: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI

Rocky Mountain: AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, NV, UT, WY

Pacific Coast: AK, CA, HI, OR, WA

**Table 4**  
**Degree Requirements for Study of a Language Other Than English in Four-Year Institutions, by Institutional Characteristics, 2009–10**

	Required	Part of Distribution Requirement	Other	Total
<b>Control</b>				
Public	51.9	38.9	9.3	100.0
Private not-for-profit	50.0	28.1	21.9	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50.7</b>	<b>32.0</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Size</b>				
999 or fewer	47.8	30.4	21.7	100.0
1,000–2,999	52.5	25.4	22.0	100.0
3,000–9,999	38.1	42.9	19.0	100.0
10,000 or more	69.2	30.8	0.0	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50.7</b>	<b>32.0</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Institutional type</b>				
Doctorate	65.6	25.0	9.4	100.0
Master's	43.5	33.9	22.6	100.0
Baccalaureate	50.0	33.9	16.1	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50.7</b>	<b>32.0</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Region*</b>				
Northeast	45.5	33.3	21.2	100.0
South Atlantic	51.3	28.2	20.5	100.0
South Central	60.0	13.3	26.7	100.0
Midwest	50.0	40.9	9.1	100.0
Rocky Mountain	50.0	37.5	12.5	100.0
Pacific Coast	54.5	27.3	18.2	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50.7</b>	<b>32.0</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*States included in each region:

Northeast: CT, DE, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT

South Atlantic: AL, DC, FL, GA, KY, MD, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV

South Central: AR, LA, MS, OK, TX

Midwest: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI

Rocky Mountain: AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, NV, UT, WY

Pacific Coast: AK, CA, HI, OR, WA



**Table 5**  
**Institutional Characteristics of the Sample, 2009–10**

	Number	Percentage
Control		
Public	54	36.0
Private not-for-profit	96	64.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Size		
999 or fewer	23	15.3
1,000–2,999	59	39.3
3,000–9,999	42	28.0
10,000 or more	26	17.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Institutional type		
Doctorate	32	21.3
Master's	62	41.3
Baccalaureate	56	37.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Region*		
Northeast	33	22.0
South Atlantic	39	26.0
South Central	15	10.0
Midwest	44	29.3
Rocky Mountain	8	5.3
Pacific Coast	11	7.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*States included in each region:

Northeast: CT, DE, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT

South Atlantic: AL, DC, FL, GA, KY, MD, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV

South Central: AR, LA, MS, OK, TX

Midwest: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI

Rocky Mountain: AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, NV, UT, WY

Pacific Coast: AK, CA, HI, OR, WA

