

## ASA Emphasizes Importance of Teaching Foreign Languages

*February 27, 2012*

The Council of the American Sociological Association (ASA) is concerned about the U.S. government's declining support for the study of foreign languages as well as prominent policy leaders' public statements downplaying the importance of American students learning languages other than English. While not all students pursuing sociology degrees in institutions of higher education are required to study foreign languages, many choose to do so. There are numerous reasons to ensure foreign language training is available as part of a sociology education as well as liberal arts and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education more generally.

Sociological research and scholarship focus on social structures and processes that range from the micro to the macro level. In studying social interaction, for example, "entering the other's world" is an important cognitive tool for developing an understanding that is valid and reliable. Without access to languages other than one's native tongue, this can be a difficult task at best and can result in erroneous findings at worst. Moreover, in studying societies and social processes—such as national and international social movements; political unrest and armed conflict; immigration and migration; and the spread of illegal drugs, armaments, or contagious diseases—access to foreign languages can be crucial to sociologists' ability to conduct impactful research that benefits society.

As a discipline, sociology needs among its scholars and researchers those who can study social phenomena that are deeply embedded in non-U.S. societies and cultures; who can validate the sociological knowledge that comes from these societies and cultures in languages other than English; who can bring historical and cultural perspectives to advancing our understanding of inter alia inequalities, economies, religions, educational systems, and political organizations; and who can prepare the next generation to do likewise. Research suggests that second generation students who are literate in two languages have better academic outcomes than their peers, and that students who graduate from U.S. institutions of higher education are increasingly turning to international work for both reasons of interest and opportunity.

Declining access to foreign languages is problematic in a field of teaching and learning such as sociology that seeks to expand our understanding of all societies in an increasingly global world. A lack of opportunities to pursue foreign languages limits not only our understanding from research and study but also the future career opportunities of our students.

Some have argued that learning foreign languages is now unnecessary because English is becoming the de facto world language. Although the lingua franca of top level diplomats, political leaders, and business executives may be English, confining research, diplomacy, and other important interactions only to international leaders who speak English makes it likely that these exchanges will not get beyond the official viewpoint. Researchers and others will learn nothing of the "backstage," the opinions of ordinary people, or the views of those who are not part of the elite. For researchers or others, relying solely on English is a formula for superficiality and misunderstanding, something our military leaders can confirm. In today's world we need more foreign language training, not less.

The ASA, founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a scientific discipline and profession, and promoting the contributions

and use of sociology to society. As the national organization for over 14,000 sociologists and related scholars and researchers, the ASA is dedicated to the teaching and learning of sociology and to working to ensure that the necessary academic resources are available to students who represent the future. Scientific training, humanistic learning, and the availability of second language education are essential to that mission.