

The Value of Italian Studies

December 22, 2020

Dear President Garimella, Provost Prelock, Dean Falls, and UVM Board of Trustees:

A foreign language class opens the window to different parts of the world and teaches the value of respecting different viewpoints, an understanding which is critical for citizens of a democratic society. The language student (see the Appendix below) has the opportunity to weigh ideas and perspectives expressed by people from other cultures and societies, in their own words, and to develop an appreciation of the world's complexity in a way that no other discipline can instill.

Along with the profound changes that have transformed higher education and the job market, a liberal arts education -- i.e., a major or minor -- remains fundamental in the education of university students and future citizens. Future professionals, engineers, doctors, biologists, and economists, etc., with training in humanistic subjects develop their critical thinking skills and empathy for others. Perhaps no other branch of study brings both the diversity of the world, and the unity of human nature, home to the student so viscerally and concretely as do foreign languages. Investigations of bilingualism and multicultural experiences have shown that the embrace of these values can reduce various phobias toward difference including xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and demonization of different religious groups.

Clearly, the full benefits of language study require a deeper knowledge of foreign languages and cultures than can be acquired in one semester or one year. A two-semester foreign language requirement like the one in the College of Arts and Sciences can give students a taste of diversity in languages, cultures, and worldviews, but for a university to claim to have a liberal arts core, it must offer students the opportunity to enter this field with all the depth and precision that years of study can bring. At a time when intercultural dialogue and meaningful collaboration are increasingly crucial to our future, both here in the U.S. and abroad, it is critical to offer a diversity of language majors and minors.

Why is it important to study other societies and cultures in their own languages? Even the best translation cannot reproduce the subtleties of the original cultural, historical and linguistic context; when these are blurred, all the contexts of English language and American culture come forward to fill the gaps. Just as importantly, language is communication. When students can communicate with other cultures and societies -- whether through texts or in actual conversation with people -- they come into direct contact with human diversity through different perspectives and worldviews. If such communication is done in English, it bears the hegemonic stamp of a dominant culture imposing its understanding on the rest of the world.

By eliminating both the major and minor in Italian Studies, the University of Vermont would remove the possibility of engaging in deep communication with a cornerstone of European history and society. The importance of Italian culture is indisputable. Italy represents a point of reference, of course, for all who study Art History. In addition, the impact of Italian cultural

production can be seen in many economic sectors such as communications, tourism, design, cinema, video games, nutrition, fashion, software design, music, and all of those professions linked to the “made in Italy” label. Major Italian figures in history -- Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Galileo -- were great thinkers whose intellectual, artistic, and scientific achievements are central not only to Italian Studies but to many other disciplines, which include, in addition to Art History, Classical Studies, Political Science, and the history of modern science. The Italian Renaissance is not simply a period of Italian cultural history, or a phase in world history, but it is rather the link between the ancient and the modern, the religious and the secular, the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. In other words, the Italian Renaissance is the cradle of what today we call our Modern Age. To deprive students access to this cultural past is to prepare them inadequately for the present in which they live.

Most of our Italian students at UVM start learning Italian at the university. The 100-level classes they take after the first two years represent their only opportunity to interact with narratives in different media intended for native speakers. Student engagement with authentic material provides them a more immediate and profound access to Italian culture, not available to students with an introductory or intermediate knowledge of the language. Eliminating the major and minor in Italian would deprive students of this field of knowledge that has informed so many other disciplines and histories.

According to the Department of French and Italian at UC Santa Barbara (see the Appendix below), UVM’s Italian program was highlighted in a letter of information released by the American Association of Italian Studies. They write, “this small Italian program had 217 students enrolled in classes taught in Italian, and dozens in classes taught in English during the 2019-20 academic year. These numbers would be excellent numbers for any of the more prestigious programs in the country.”

These numbers show that, despite the so-called “crisis” in the humanities, there continues to be a great interest in Italian language and culture among UVM students. In addition, students continue to view foreign language study as a fundamental element in their college education, as well as an asset for future professional careers in many fields both in the humanities and in the sciences and social sciences.

The programs you intend to cut are not expensive ones to run, even with modest enrollments, yet the value that they add to the intellectual profile and spiritual vitality of any university is immeasurable. Furthermore, as a land-grant university, UVM has a particular obligation to Vermonters (see Anne Houston’s letter in the Appendix below). It is through engagement in these kinds of fields that critical agility, interpretive subtlety, historical consciousness, and effective writing skills are best developed. Therefore, since UVM claims to value truth, facts, and objective knowledge and the academic preparation that sharpens students’ analytical and perceptual skills, we should be encouraging the study of languages and cultures different from ours.

Appendix:

From the Dept of French and Italian at UC Santa Barbara:

In addition to all these general considerations about the importance of Italian Studies within the humanities, we are also shocked that as vital a program such as that of Italian at the University of Vermont would be targeted for elimination. According to a letter of information released by the American Association of Italian Studies, this small Italian program had 217 students enrolled in classes taught in Italian, and dozens in classes taught in English during the 2019-20 academic year. These numbers would be excellent numbers for any of the more prestigious programs in the country. Indeed, they are entirely comparable to those in our own university, UCSB. By closing a program with those numbers, you would not only disrespect the efforts of your faculty, make small programs pay for financial difficulties about which they have no responsibility, but you would also send a chilling message of disrespect to the whole community of Italian language instructors and Italian Studies scholars.

Letter from Anne Houston, UVM, Class of 2006, to President Garimella, Provost Prelock, Dean Falls, and UVM Board of Trustees:

I am a UVM alumna who came to the University on a Green & Gold Scholarship after finishing top of my class at Craftsbury Academy in the Northeast Kingdom. I double majored in Italian Studies and French, graduating cum laude and as a John Dewey Scholar in 2006. Three generations and over a dozen members of my family have received or are currently pursuing degrees from UVM in a variety of fields.

[Today] I work in finance. I have a master's of science in non-profit administration. I understand the pressures of budgeting, restricted funding streams, and trying to make it all come together. But there has to be a conversation around the true value and objective of the university and its public service. Money talks, but it certainly doesn't speak for everything.

My transcript displays a potpourri of courses that would no longer exist under the new plan. From a personal perspective, my studies, the focus of my studies, and the fact that they occurred at UVM, are inextricably linked to who I am today. I took Italian on a whim, and was swept up in the incredible dedication of my fellow classmates and professors. The Italian language faculty taught with zeal and cared so deeply about our engagement and success with the subject. I often pitied fellow UVMers who would talk about which professors were phoning it in – either not caring about teaching at all and overly engrossed in research, or teaching wholeheartedly but without the research projects to inspire students. My French and Italian professors were and still are so solidly at the center of the Venn Diagram: they have poured themselves into their careers at this university; they have given so much for the sake of their students and passion for teaching and research.

My degree means the world to me, thus why I'm speaking out so strongly. It is the reason why I jumped on a plane to Rome the year after graduating, and how I have found so many beautiful friendships over the years. It is how I learned to make mistakes in the moment and not want to crawl in a hole and die, but rather recover, learn, and improve. It is why I was successful as an ESL teacher in Chelsea, MA, replicating many of my Italian professors' tactics with my own students. It is why I was able to go above and beyond in my grad school studies at Boston University, which earned me the department's Excellence in Graduate Studies Award. It is why I returned to Waterman years later to speak with Italian major seniors and reassure, "Even if you don't end up using the language every day, your education *will* be of value. I am proof of that." And, even today, as I stare at and try to wrap my mind around what seems like an impossible chart of accounts used by the state for education accounting, it is how I am able to be patient and reassure myself, "Much like translation, these numbers are telling a story – find that story the way you did by conjugating verbs and figuring out the intent of that preposition."

My family did not have a lot of money when I came to UVM – we'd recently sold our farm and were still economically recovering. The Green & Gold Scholarship was a lifeline to opportunities that only UVM could provide. I am heartbroken that other farm kids like me might not have their world open up the same way mine did by randomly taking that one liberal arts class that started an entire journey to defining oneself and being successful in life.

Letter from Ben Eldredge, UVM, Class of 2006, to President Garimella, Provost Prelock, Dean Falls, and UVM Board of Trustees:

Professors Borra, Jamieson, Mazzoni, and Pucci taught me to speak in ways I didn't know I could, to think about multiple problems at once, to interrogate both content and medium, along with all of the contradictions and rich layers inherent in parsing the two. When a new Italian Studies Major was announced, I did everything I could to fulfill it, and the zeal of my fellow students was a constant support. My joy in these programs propelled me from a middling, lazy high school student to a prodding, passionate thinker. My majors have given me meaning and critical skills to think, speak, and work analytically. Your proposals would eliminate my entire course of study and endanger the jobs of faculty I respect and care for. Even more importantly, you would deny future students the opportunity I had to follow a surprising, unexpected route to a fulfilling intellectual as well as professional life. It's not just individual classes that support students to explore, it's structures, methodologies, and programs which have been designed and honed by experts in their fields.

Letter from Luca Piccin, UVM, Class of 2014, to President Garimella, Provost Prelock, Dean Falls, and UVM Board of Trustees:

It was my overwhelmingly positive, engaging and challenging experience in the department that compelled me to study abroad in Milan, Italy where I was one of few in the program able to take classes in Italian with local students, rather than the program specifically for American students. After graduating in 2014 with a minor in Italian, and a brief stint working retail in New York

City, it was my ability to speak confidently in Italian that got me a job as the assistant to a filmmaker named Luca Guadagnino. I moved to Italy, and worked on a small film called *Call Me By Your Name*, which went on to be nominated for three Oscars and win one, and become a cultural touchstone. My courses in Italian paved the way for a career in film, TV and art, more than any other facet of my academic experience. Not only did we learn to read and analyze Dante in two languages, the Italian department provided me with the most tangible path to a successful post-collegiate career.

Signed the faculty of the Department of Romance Languages and Cultures,

Deborah Cafiero, Senior Lecturer of Spanish
Meaghan Emery, Associate Professor of French
Adriana Borra, Senior Lecturer of German, French and Italian
Paolo Pucci, Associate Professor of Italian
Tina Escaja, Distinguished Professor of Spanish and Gender and Women's Studies
Juan Maura, Professor of Spanish
Charles-Louis Morand-Métivier, Associate Professor of French
McKew Devitt, Senior Lecturer of Spanish
Rachael Montesano, Senior Lecturer of Spanish
David H. Uzzell Jr., Senior Lecturer of Spanish
Ernesto Ebratt, Senior Lecturer of Spanish
Maria Patrizia Jamieson, Lecturer of Italian
Gretchen van Slyke, Professor of French
Ignacio López-Vicuña, Associate Professor of Spanish
John V Waldron, Associate Professor of Spanish
Antonello Borra, Professor of Italian
Cristina Mazzoni, Wolfgang and Barbara Mieder Green and Gold Professor of Italian

Signed the faculty of the Department of German and Russian,

Adriana Borra, Senior Lecturer of German, French and Italian
Gideon Bavly, Lecturer of Hebrew
Kathleen Scollins, Associate Professor of Russian
Julia Katsnelson, Lecturer of Russian
Wolfgang Mieder, Professor of German and Folklore
Helga Schreckenberger, Wolfgang and Barbara Mieder Green and Gold Professor of German