Higher education is being urged to do its part in a national effort to overcome the United States’ language deficit, the fact that this country, where languages other than English are being spoken by over 65 million people, has trouble getting the rest of the population to learn those languages: a serious liability in a world where the assumption that “English is enough” finds itself increasingly challenged, both globally and locally.

While college students are not, as adults, best equipped to learn another tongue quickly, college language learning has specific merits: the ability to be infused with cultural knowledge and to be developed in connection with other fields. What our students are best placed to acquire along with language skills is a lot of information about languages, resulting in a deeper awareness of their practical, social, and cultural value.

As a microcosm of the country’s linguistic diversity, the State University of New Jersey is ideally armed to make languages a cornerstone of the education it provides. Yet the opposite is true: our students’ tapestry of linguistic competences remains an untapped resource, and the absence of a graduation requirement in world languages at Rutgers-New Brunswick (beyond the SAS/RBS Honors Program) is a glaring anomaly that makes our language programs smaller and more vulnerable than they are at most comparable institutions.

One way to repair this anomaly would be to create a traditional “proficiency requirement” (2 to 4 semesters of language study, waived for applicants who match this level, with exemptions for credit-intensive programs). However, the creation ex nihilo of such a requirement (NB- or SAS-wide) would:

- have a disproportionate impact on applicants from disadvantaged high school districts (with poor preparation in languages), while their more privileged counterparts would place out;
- have little to no impact on our large population of heritage speakers and multilingual students, who would simply place out – and whose skills and potential would continue to go unheeded;
- force the disproportionate creation, in many language programs, of low-level language sections to accommodate large numbers of students who would not go on once the requirement is met;
- force the addition of 6 to 12 credits to the Core Curriculum, which would make it unsustainable in financial, curricular, scheduling, and time-to-degree terms; or the replacement of a substantial portion of the Core, which would be destructive and generate complications (and infighting) across SAS and beyond.

Instead, RU-NB should seize this opportunity to develop truly innovative requirements that:

- encourage not only beginners or semi-beginners, but students at all levels to take on world languages and improve their own linguistic competences, whatever they may be;
- bring RU-NB’s amazing linguistic diversity to the forefront of campus life, and transform it into the academic, intellectual, cultural resource it deserves to become;
- foster interdisciplinarity, in the form of partnerships and synergies between language studies and a variety of fields that have an interest in developing them for their own reasons;
- offer, instead of a one-size-fits-all structure, a set of dynamic ones that can grow organically over time across our institution, without inflicting too much pressure on curricula, Core Curriculum included.

Accordingly, the Task Force is proposing:

1) a very small, one-credit language requirement, added to the Core, which should ideally be adopted by all RU-NB schools and units (no exemptions, no place-out) and would be met in a variety of ways: traditional language courses, 1-credit language modules added to courses in other subjects or set within other structures (such as Study Abroad), mini-courses on languages and language learning, new forms of student interaction in languages other than English (such as conversation and tutoring) supervised by a new Council on Linguistic Diversity. The 1-credit requirement works as a spark; it triggers linguistic discoveries, fosters linguistic awareness, and helps promote a diversified, interactive language culture across RU-NB.

2) a larger, 6-to-8-credit language requirement, independent from but coordinate with the Core, and earning a Seal of Multilingual Competence. This second requirement – only for those divisions and units that adopt it and commit to developing it – does not allow place-out or exemptions either (as a rule, though it is cut in half for transfer students). It can be fulfilled within or beyond the Core, at any level, including the most advanced. Its content (e.g. language modules, field-specific language courses, interdisciplinary minors) should be developed before the requirement itself is put in place. The 6-to-8-credit requirement can also optionally be met (and the Seal earned) by individual students in the programs that do not adopt it.

3) a number of detailed language-related initiatives and programs, which are meant to serve as content and incentives for the two requirements, but can (and should) also be developed on their own.