

African-American Students' Opinions About Foreign Language Study: An Exploratory Study of Low Enrollments at the College Level

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Abstract: *Persistent low numbers of African Americans in the foreign language teacher certification program at the University of Texas at Austin motivated the study reported here. Two groups of students responded to a questionnaire that sought information on foreign language experience at elementary and high school, as well as family experiences in foreign languages. Findings revealed that whereas very few students had the opportunity to study a foreign language at the elementary level, all were exposed to at least a two-year compulsory program at high school. These experiences were not motivating enough to encourage college-level continuation, nor were family experiences. Students' language preferences did not support previous findings that low enrollment figures resulted from language offerings that lacked ethnic and cultural appeal. Rather, the study found that there appeared to be little effort made to encourage African-American high school and college students to consider teaching career paths. Students recommended more aggressive dissemination of information to African-American students at the college level about the advantages on pursuing foreign language study. They overwhelmingly suggested including a foreign language requirement in all discipline areas.*

Key words: *African Americans and foreign language education, low enrollments, minorities and foreign languages*

Languages: *Relevant to all foreign languages*

Background

Persistent low enrollments of African-American students in foreign language programs in the University of Texas at Austin captured the attention of the researcher, who was particularly concerned with the low numbers of African Americans in the teacher certification program in general and more specifically with the virtual absence of African Americans in the foreign language teaching program. From January 1994 to December 2003, there were only 6 African-American students enrolled in the foreign language teaching program out of a total of over 300. The African-American student enrollment in the university is 4% (approximately 2,000 out of 50,000). In order for the teaching program to reflect this presence there should be at least 3 African American students in the teaching program every year. What are possible explanations for the persistent low enrollment?

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