



Linguistic Society of America

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E. Gordon Gee, President
Maryanne Reed, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
West Virginia University
Stewart Hall
1500 University Avenue
Morgantown, WV 26506-6203

August 22, 2023

Dear President Gee and Provost Reed:

I am President of the Linguistic Society of America, an organization of several thousand members that represents those working in the field of linguistics. I am also the Jesse H. Jones Regents Professor in Liberal Arts at the University of Texas, Austin, teaching in the Department of Linguistics. As someone who has spent my entire career in higher education, I understand that these are challenging times, and university leaders are increasingly called upon to make difficult decisions and choices. Still, I was surprised and deeply dismayed at the plan to close the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics (WLLL) at West Virginia University. I ask that you and the other West Virginia University leaders please consider the following points before finalizing your plans.

WLLL is a department of immense value to WVU, the State of West Virginia, and its citizens and students. It follows a winning and efficient strategy by bringing together under one roof the teaching of [nine major foreign languages](#), and of linguistics, the scientific study of language, which has applications and practice ranging from language teaching, to artificial intelligence, to brain science, and to the documentation and preservation of the world's languages.

WLLL houses the only linguistics program in the state of West Virginia and one of outsized value. As WVU Associate Professor of Linguistics Jonah Katz has written,

We are a very small program...but punch well above our weight in both research output and external grant funding [...] WVU linguists [...] have served thousands of students here over decades. They have helped document and preserve the unique linguistic heritage of the region, from ethnographic studies on Appalachian English in public-school classrooms to the only existing work documenting the Spanish spoken in West Virginia. They have helped train generations of public-school foreign-language and English teachers in a state facing a dire shortage of K-12 educators. And they have served as one of the few connections between West Virginia students and the larger world, from study-abroad programs to

scientific training that has prepared students for graduate study at some of the most prestigious institutions in the United States and beyond.

Together with a WLLL faculty colleague, Katz himself [recently won a highly competitive \\$249,794 grant](#) from the National Science Foundation to study the acoustics of how people carry out complex details of pronunciation that differ from language to language. As is common in linguistics, study of everyday language phenomena such as these leads directly to novel, fundamental multidisciplinary inquiry into physiology, psychoacoustics, computation, human behavior, and cultural diversity. Moreover, as you well know, interdisciplinary grants that are based in the sciences add materially to the prestige and visibility of the institutions that receive them. And this is not just a one-off: according to WVU's own commissioned study publicly posted [here](#) (see p. 7), WLLL generated profits of more than \$800,000 in each of the last three years.

WLLL at WVU also builds bridges between West Virginia's young citizens and the global community where so many opportunities for individual and statewide growth are to be found. This is marvelously illustrated in the [story of Joseph Reppert](#), who leveraged his WVU degree in Spanish and M.A. in Linguistics to land his dream job as a West Virginia National Guard Special Liaison in Peru. But there is more: the global community is now bursting with excitement and investment in the many applications of linguistics, from staples like Siri, Alexa, or Google Translate, to, most recently, generative artificial intelligence and 'large language models' such as ChatGPT. In universities across America and across the globe, this is leading to major expansions in computational linguistics programs and in connections between linguistics and computer science departments. It would be a shame for young West Virginians to miss out on such opportunities and on their future. Far from cutting WLLL, this is a prime time for WVU to invest in the department.

In closing, I urge you, and the WVU Board of Governors, to reconsider the plan to close the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics at West Virginia University. I believe that with another look at the readily available evidence, you will conclude that it is in the best interests of your university's bottom line, your students' futures, and your state's wellbeing to preserve this department and its faculty and programs. If you would like to discuss any of the points in this letter, I am at your service. Please feel free to call on me.

Sincerely yours,



Anthony C. Woodbury
President, Linguistic Society of America
Jesse H. Jones Regents Professor in Liberal Arts
The University of Texas at Austin • Department of Linguistics

CC:

West Virginia University Board of Governors, via Special Assistant Valerie Lopez
Governor Jim Justice