



June 1, 2020

Dear President Nellis, Provost Sayrs, and Dean Plassmann,

I write as president of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL) and on behalf of the entire executive committee of our organization. For almost seventy years AATSEEL has advocated for the study of Russia and Eastern Europe, an area of the world of vital importance to American geopolitical interests and to the possibility of world peace. The need to understand this part of the world is as urgent today as it has ever been.

As Ohio University and other institutions of higher education respond to the global health crisis caused by COVID-19, we urge you and the members of your university's administration to reconsider the cuts to faculty and staff appointments, especially the recent termination of Russian faculty Dr. Mila Shevchenko, Associate Professor of Instruction, and Tetyana Dovbnya, Visiting Assistant Professor of Russian. As the two sole faculty members teaching Russian language courses at Ohio University, Professors Shevchenko and Dovbnya are integral to the continuation of the Russian language program. Terminating their positions not only disrupts the academic plans of your undergraduate students, it negatively impacts their current and future careers. More broadly, such a decision will effectively end one of the region's most vibrant undergraduate Russian programs, depriving the university of an impactful leadership position in global education.

While we acknowledge the economic hardship OU is facing, cutting faculty and staff positions like those of the Russian program goes against the core values of your institution and the principles upon which you stand. The university's vision statement outlines that "Ohio University will be the nation's best transformative learning community where students realize their promise, faculty advance knowledge, staff achieve excellence, and alumni become global leaders." The records our colleagues have established at OU clearly demonstrate that they are fulfilling that mission. Moreover, they and their predecessors have proved transformative mentors to your students who, both during their undergraduate careers and as alumni, have gone on to be global leaders thanks to their understanding of the Russian language and Russophone culture. Terminating the positions of those very faculty who advance knowledge and achieve excellence robs your students of the opportunity to fulfill their academic potential.

The need to generate revenue and mitigate the current budgetary crisis is a common goal among US institutions of higher education. However, cutting language programs at a time of a global

pandemic and rising trends of xenophobia is not the way to reach financial stability. The disastrous consequences and the loss of opportunity for your undergraduates outweighs any possible financial benefit to closing this program. Consider, instead, the multitude of benefits learning Russian has had and will continue to have on your student population, your campus community, and your institution overall as it prepares undergraduates for the demands of a globalized, interconnected world.

Acquiring proficiency in Russian language is more important now than ever. The Russian language, which is designated by the National Security Education Program as a critical language, remains one of the most needed skills by the military and for those working in the foreign service and throughout other branches of the US government. Russian is the fourth most broadly spoken language in the world and also in demand in business and other industries. Moreover, in an election year, it seems more problematic than ever to cut this language, given its national security and cybersecurity implications.

OU alumni who have used Russian productively in private and public sectors, have repeatedly called attention to the impact their Russian professors and the learning of Russian has had in their lives. It is just such student-faculty collaboration and mentorship that sustains an institution during financial crises. Such statements from your alumni confirm what we know to be true: language learning, especially learning a critical language like Russian, gives students essential global awareness and a strategic edge both as critical thinkers and in their future careers.

We urge the administration to reconsider the planned closure of the Russian program at OU and to implement, in its place, a plan for the university's future that protects your faculty and ensures the future of your undergraduate mission.

We have shared this letter with two other national organizations: The American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) and The Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). Both have asked to be added as signatories, and, in accordance with their wishes, we include their board members below.

Sincerely,

Michael Wachtel  
Professor  
Slavic Department  
Princeton University

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