

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN SENATE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY
(First Reading; Information)

EP.25.082 Revision to the Language Other Than English (LOTE) Requirement for Online Degree Completion Programs

BACKGROUND

As part of its baccalaureate degree requirements, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign requires all undergraduate students to “obtain credit or demonstrate proficiency at the third college semester level or satisfactorily complete the third secondary school year of language other than English.” However, as the university has begun to offer online baccalaureate programs aimed at adult students who have completed some college but do not hold a bachelor’s degree, i.e., “online degree-completion programs,” questions have emerged regarding whether the Language Other Than English (LOTE) requirement presents a significantly greater barrier to degree completion for students in these programs than for those who enter the University directly out of high school. In the spring of 2025, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences requested that the LOTE requirement for its online degree-completion program, the Bachelor of Liberal Studies, be lowered to the second level rather than the third. This compromise is intended to preserve the central academic role of LOTE education while addressing the challenges faced by students in online degree-completion programs and the goal of the state of Illinois and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign of increasing access for this large and important group of students.

The current policy for granting exceptions to the General Education requirement is stated in EP.89.09: “these General Education requirements will be considered binding upon all baccalaureate programs, unless it is demonstrated to the Senate Educational Policy Committee and to the Senate that students in a specific degree program cannot meet these requirements. An alternative set of requirements for that program would then be proposed to the Senate.” In the opinion of the Educational Policy Committee, the conditions justifying granting an exception to the LOTE requirement under existing policy are not fulfilled for online degree completion programs in general. Although, as in the case of traditional students, there may be some individual exceptions, students in these programs (i.e., adult students returning to formal education after an absence, possibly enrolling part time) generally can fulfill the third-level LOTE requirement. Nevertheless, it is often quite difficult for such students to complete the third level of LOTE and costly to the program to require students to do so, and there are compelling reasons why a reduction in the LOTE requirement may be justified for such programs.

Recognizing that granting an exception to the LOTE requirement is not covered by current policy but that the university may nevertheless wish to do so, the Educational Policy Committee believes that the best approach to the issue is not to grant exceptions on a program-by-program

basis, but rather to clearly define a class of programs—online degree completion programs—to which the exception will apply, thereby underscoring that the exception is narrowly tailored so as not to erode the university’s longstanding commitment to language education and providing clear guidance regarding the extent and limitations of the exception to the university community and to other programs that may seek to implement a similar exception.

RECOMMENDATION

The Senate Committee on Educational Policy recommends approval of the following revision to the Language Other Than English (LOTE) requirement for online degree completion programs as stated in [EP.17.14](#). Text to be added is shown in **bold and double underlined**.

EP.17.14

3. Language Other Than English

To ensure that all UIUC graduates will have a working knowledge of a language other than English, each student must obtain credit or demonstrate proficiency at the third college semester level or satisfactorily complete the third secondary school year of language other than English.

In recognition of the unique challenges faced by adult, part-time, transfer, and returning students, students in online degree completion programs must obtain credit or demonstrate proficiency at the second college semester level or satisfactorily complete the second secondary school year of a language other than English, provided the program requires students formerly enrolled as degree-seeking students at the university to be absent for at least one year (two semesters) before returning.

Online degree completion programs are defined as bachelor’s degree programs that are offered exclusively online, admit only off-campus transfer students or students returning to the university after an absence, and allow for part-time enrollment. A one-year absence includes consecutive fall and spring semesters, in either order. Residential programs and programs accepting first-year applicants¹ are not eligible for this exception. A program requesting a reduction in the LOTE requirement for its students under this provision shall follow ordinary governance procedures. As part of these procedures the Senate Committee on Educational Policy shall evaluate whether the above conditions are met and provide a recommendation to the Senate.

¹ A first-year applicant is a degree-seeking student who applies for admission while attending high school and/or hasn’t graduated yet, regardless of the amount of college degree credit earned; or is a student enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer term; or who, since graduating from high school, hasn’t attended another postsecondary institution as a degree-seeking undergraduate student. See the [Illinois Admissions web site](#).

3.1 To have its language course sequence approved as meeting the general requirement, each language department must develop a statement of competencies expected of a student satisfactorily completing the second and third-semester level course. These competencies should be stated as a range of skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that demonstrate general language proficiency and contribute to cultural understanding. These competencies will vary from one language department to another.

3.2 Courses approved as meeting the Language Other Than English requirement should have well designed systems for the preparation and ongoing supervision of teaching assistants by faculty.

3.3 Courses approved as meeting the Language Other Than English requirement should be taught with section sizes small enough to promote development of a substantial working knowledge of the language.

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ADDITIONAL RATIONALE

The proposed amendment to the Language Other Than English (LOTE) requirement reflects a careful and focused response to the distinct needs of students enrolled in online degree completion programs at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. These programs serve adult students who are returning to higher education, often on a part-time basis, after an extended period away from formal academic study. As the university expands access through flexible, online pathways, it is necessary to ensure that degree requirements remain both meaningful for sustained language-learning outcomes and achievable for these programs and their intended audience. The rationale that follows outlines the academic, logistical, and equity-based considerations that support reducing the LOTE requirement from three semesters to two for students in these programs.

1. Equity and Access Issues for Degree-Completion Students

Degree-completion programs are specifically designed to serve adult students who bring varied academic backgrounds and extensive life and work experience to their studies. These students typically differ significantly from traditional residential undergraduates. For example, the Bachelor of Liberal Studies program describes a typical student as age 25-34, working full time, and unable to attend in-person classes due to career and family commitments. While the evidence does not support the view that older students are less able to complete basic LOTE courses successfully, the fact that they may have been out of formal education for extended periods can make it especially challenging to resume academic study in a structured language sequence. For example, students who last studied a language years ago often lack the proficiency to succeed in higher-level language courses and must instead restart at the introductory level, adding up to three additional courses to their degree plan.

Nationally, in recent years fewer than 40% of students complete the third level of a language other than English in high school.^{2,3} For these students, the expectation of proficiency at the third college semester level represents not only a logistical hurdle but also an access gap rooted in prior educational opportunity. These structural barriers fall most heavily on those from under-resourced high schools and nontraditional academic backgrounds—populations for whom consistent access to extended LOTE instruction has not always been guaranteed, raising additional equity concerns.

This disparity in LOTE background carries forward into higher education outcomes. Data from current LAS transfer students is somewhat informative. While approximately 17% of LAS students who begin as first-years had fewer than three levels of LOTE in high school, that number is 29% for students who enter as transfers. For domestic LAS transfer students aged 25

² **Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2022 (NCES 2023-092)*, Table 225.70: Number and percentage of public and private high school graduates who took foreign language courses in high school and average number of credits earned, by language and number of credits: 2000, 2009, and 2019. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_225.70.asp

³ Internal calculations suggest this number may be slightly, but not significantly, higher for Illinois. Beginning in school year 2028-2029, Illinois students will be required to take two years of a foreign language to graduate. Prior to that there was no graduation requirement.

and older, around two-thirds of the students entered with fewer than three levels of LOTE. Among LAS transfer students overall, approximately 91% of students who entered with three or more levels of LOTE graduate, while only 86% of those entering with between two and three levels of LOTE and 78% of those entering with fewer than two levels complete their degrees. Students who enter as first-years experience a similar decline in degree completion from 88% for students with three or more levels to 77% for students with fewer than two levels.⁴

While the data illustrates that older students are likely to have less extensive LOTE background than younger ones and that degree completion rates decline with LOTE background, this decline should not be interpreted as the causal effect of LOTE background or the LOTE requirement on degree completion. Students who arrive with fewer levels of LOTE are likely to have faced a broader set of challenges that may also impact degree completion.

As an additional challenge, students in degree completion programs often enroll part time due to work, caregiving responsibilities, or other obligations. The added burden of a three-course language sequence can significantly extend their time to degree completion. This extension may increase financial strain and reduce student motivation, which in turn can negatively impact retention and graduation rates. Reducing the LOTE requirement from three to two semesters represents a more equitable expectation for these nontraditional students, supporting both academic success and degree attainment.

2. Barriers to Meeting the Third-Level LOTE Requirement

The current LOTE requirement presents unique challenges for students in online degree completion programs because it is the only general degree requirement that requires completion of a three-course sequence. As stated above, older students who last studied a language in high school may have to restart the language sequence at level one. For students balancing academic work with professional and personal obligations, this requirement can be a major obstacle to timely progress.

Compounding this issue is the limited availability of third-semester language courses in the online format at this time. Currently, online options offered by our university are largely restricted to Spanish and American Sign Language. Although the possibility of increased enrollments could drive the creation of new online courses, in the immediate future students who studied other languages, such as French or German, may find no practical way to meet the existing requirement without changing languages and starting over. In addition, the third-level language courses that are offered on campus are often offered online only during the winter and summer sessions, further complicating scheduling. These limitations significantly reduce student agency and increase frustration, undermining the inclusive and flexible mission of

⁴ Although this data are illustrative, it is important to note that these graduation rates are with respect to the current LAS LOTE requirement of four levels, not the campus standard of three. On the other hand, the graduation rates are not broken down by age, and the challenges faced by older students are likely to be more significant than average.

degree completion programs. If scheduling challenges prevent a student from taking the sequence in three contiguous semesters, this could reduce learning.

3. Alignment with State Goals, Peer Institutions, and Past Senate Practice

The Illinois Board of Higher Education's strategic framework, *A Thriving Illinois*, identifies the removal of barriers that have "prevented students of color, first generation college students, low-income students, adult learners, rural students, and others from accessing and succeeding in higher education."⁵ With respect to adult students, the strategic plan explicitly recognizes the need to adopt teaching methods appropriate to these students and to offer programs in formats that meet their needs. Lowering but not eliminating the LOTE requirement for students in online degree-completion programs is consistent with this guidance.

Lowering the LOTE requirement for online degree-completion programs is also consistent with state-wide practice. Degree-completion pathways in Illinois have historically not included LOTE requirements, recognizing the unique constraints faced by returning, part-time, or transfer students. Within the state, numerous public institutions operate degree-completion programs with no LOTE requirement, including Chicago State University, Eastern Illinois University, Governors State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Western Illinois University, and the University of Illinois Springfield. Even Northwestern University, a peer private institution, does not require LOTE for comparable programs.

Comparable institutions beyond Illinois follow a similar model. Georgetown University, the University of Pennsylvania, Purdue University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Maryland all offer degree-completion or adult-focused programs that do not include any LOTE requirement.⁶ In contrast, the amendment proposed here preserves a modified LOTE expectation by requiring second-level proficiency, which is more rigorous than the standard practice among these peer programs.

The Senate has previously acknowledged that some student populations—particularly those navigating exceptional structural or educational constraints—may require flexibility in meeting the standard baccalaureate degree requirements. For example, in response to Public Act 102-0174, the Senate approved online degree pathways in Early Childhood Education that did not include the full general education or LOTE requirements. While those programs were created under specific legislative circumstances and should not be viewed as direct precedents, their approval reflects the Senate's willingness to adapt degree expectations when student circumstances make traditional requirements unworkable. The current proposal applies that same principle to a well-defined category of students.

⁵ [*A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth*, p. 13.](#)

⁶ Although many peer institutions have no LOTE requirement, some do. For example, Penn State World Campus requires the equivalent of 4 levels of LOTE and Arizona State Online requires 3.

Conclusion

The proposal to reduce the LOTE requirement to the second level for online degree completion programs is grounded in demonstrated need, sound educational reasoning, and institutional responsibility. The current sequence of three or more courses required to meet third-level proficiency presents substantial obstacles for adult learners—particularly those from under-resourced educational backgrounds and those returning to college after long absences. These obstacles are compounded by limited online course offerings and the requirement's rigid structure, which does not align with the flexible and accessible design principles of online degree completion programs.

Importantly, this proposed change does *not* alter the LOTE requirement for students in traditional, residential undergraduate programs or for any programs that admit first-year students. The full third-level LOTE requirement remains in place for those populations, and nothing in this proposal is intended to serve as a basis for a broader exemption. This change, while allowing online degree-completion programs to lower their LOTE requirement, does not require them to do so, nor would it prevent the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences from maintaining its higher requirement of the fourth level of LOTE should it choose to do so. Instead, the amendment establishes a narrowly tailored exception for a clearly defined group of students, those enrolled in fully online, part-time, degree-completion programs that serve transfer and returning adult learners.

By maintaining a second-level LOTE requirement (rather than the third level or zero) the proposal supports the University's educational goals while addressing real barriers to degree completion. It reflects a pragmatic and equitable approach that aligns with both peer practices and the Senate's past flexibility in the face of exceptional student needs.