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An Open Letter to President E. Gordon Gee

President Gee,

Our organization is committed to teaching and scholarship in the literatures of the world in multiple languages. As scholars in the field of Comparative Literature, we write concerning your decision to cut your world languages department and the faculty associated with teaching languages and the humanities more broadly; according to the latest reports, you plan to eliminate 12 majors and 20 graduate programs – in the humanities as well as in education, mathematics and public health – while firing 7 percent of your full-time faculty for short term gains that will irreversibly damage your campus, your community and the state of West Virginia.

Knowledge of languages is absolutely central to the commitment outlined in the mission statement of your university, to “creating a diverse and inclusive culture that advances education, healthcare, and prosperity for all by providing access and opportunity; by advancing high-impact research; and by leading transformation in West Virginia and the world through local, state and global engagement.” This statement is a promise to embrace diversity and inclusiveness, as well as a commitment to local and global transformation. The process of learning languages collectively and using them both within and outside the United States to understand contemporary and historical cultures is pivotal for comprehending how people make sense of the world.

The mission of education is distinct from satisfying a demand. A major’s lack of popularity cannot be deployed as a justification for its erasure. Interest in diverse fields and locations of inquiry must continue to be cultivated. Because access to scholarship and cultural production in other languages is essential for fostering international engagement, a public university such as West Virginia University should be doing everything in its power to *create* rather than *follow* student enrollment trends, to build sustainable programs, and thereby uphold the promises put forward in its own mission statement.

The decision not to request more funds from the state but rather to make dramatic cuts and then simply seek approval validates and entrenches the systematic underfunding of higher education. The financial threats to the integrity of WVU’s

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curriculum offer a case study in underfunding that should prompt us to reaffirm the importance of education, which includes the kind of intercultural competence that can be developed only through the study of languages and cultures. To eradicate the prospect of learning a language at a public university is to preempt access to the worlds it opens for our students. Indeed, denying this access in a public university entrenches a national class system in which students in certain states enjoy higher degrees of global mobility and intercultural literacy than others. If you do not view the effort to enhance such mobility and literacy as part of your task as an administrator of a public university, then you are doing West Virginia's students as citizens—and the entire state of West Virginia itself—a great disservice. Our shared struggle as educators against anti-intellectualism and insularity should spur a recommitment to demanding state funds rather than caving to narrow-mindedly utilitarian pressures to abandon crucial sources of knowledge whose potential bearing on our collective future is impossible to gauge.

This is not the time to abandon the project of democratizing education. We urge you to safeguard that project by insisting upon increased funding that will enable your institution to uphold a commitment to language learning as the fulcrum of a diversely engaged humanities.

Sincerely,

The Executive Committee of ACLA