

Foreign language requirement for doctorate in business administration being phased out after long controversy.

The Foreign Language Requirement for Doctoral Programs in Business Administration

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Abstract

A foreign language has been a requirement for a doctorate since the degree was first granted in the United States in 1861. Since the 1940s and 1950s, the need for the language requirement has been challenged because of the ready availability of translated research materials. With the business administration disciplines, the foreign language for the doctorate has traditionally been required. A survey of the business administration doctoral programs (67 percent response rate) indicated that only six responding schools required a foreign language for graduation. Of these six schools, only two schools would not permit a mathematical or computer language substitution. The foreign language requirement for a doctorate in business administration has been effectively removed for the degree.

The Terminal Degree

The doctorate is the historical terminal degree associated with higher education in the United States. A foreign language has been associated with the degree since it was first granted at Yale in 1867. In 1872, Cornell added the knowledge of Greek to the Latin requirement for the doctorate. Educational historians have traced the perceived need for foreign languages for college instruction to the fact that American scholars went to Europe in the late 19th century for their advanced studies where a knowledge of French and German was essential. This language requirement became closely identified with the educated person including the teacher who identified himself by the title doctor. The

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primary question at that time appears to be whether the language requirement should be Latin or a modern language such as French or German. Possibly it should be two of these languages. The foreign language requirement for a research-oriented degree like the doctorate remained relatively unchallenged until the 1930s. World War II interrupted the calm. Suddenly the center of new scientific knowledge was the English-speaking world, particularly the United States. After the war, debate began about the relevance of arbitrary educational requirements imposed on a generation of Americans whose lives were interrupted by wartime activities.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, most research materials were written in English. Why continue to require a foreign language for advanced education when it really wasn't necessary? Educational reforms, however, found that a longtime attribute such as foreign language is not easily eliminated from a tradition steeped doctoral program. The language requirement was deeply rooted in tradition.

Fundamental questioning of foreign language requirement was strongest in the social sciences. If the languages were no longer functional, the argument went, they become artificial and punitive. Justification had to be more than merely the mark of a cultured person. Prior (1965) stated the situation as "The present earnest efforts to preserve the language requirement for the Ph.D. may be seen, therefore, as a relic of the idealism which characterized the work of those who were associated with the Ph.D. at its beginning and which is reflected in the present efforts to make the degree a symbol of the man of learning at its best."¹ In the 1970s, few doctoral students have been found to study foreign languages but they are formally or informally studying methodology and computer applications.²

Berelson (1960) gave two basic justifications for including a foreign language in a doctoral program.

1. Cultural justification—it is still the mark of an educated person.
2. Professional justification—the foreign language is still needed as a tool for research in the social and natural science disciplines.³

Critics responded that the availability of translations makes the language requirement anachronistic to the point that few students use the language in their dissertation or course work and the requirement should be dropped. If the language requirement is as important as the proponents say it is, say the critics, then language proficiency should be a fixed requirement for admissions because it is unfair to ask the student to pay tuition fees to a graduate school while he is gaining an elementary knowledge of a foreign language.⁴

Berelson surveyed a population of graduate deans, graduate faculty and recent recipients of doctoral degrees. Three-quarters of each group agreed with the statement, "The foreign language requirement at the doctoral level has come to be a form without much substance in a sizable proportion of cases." The social sciences and professional fields have resolved the question by the easy remedy of generally dropping the language requirement. The natural sciences and humanities have taken a more difficult approach by requiring a higher level of language proficiency than previously required.⁵

Heiss (1970) asked a similar question to recently completed Ph.D. recipients. He found 58 percent reported that the language requirement did not contribute to their intellectual development. Only 6 percent said that it had contributed a great deal and 30 percent said it had contributed somewhat. Ninety percent said they were required to demonstrate an ability to understand one or more foreign lan-

guages, 58 percent reported they never used the language for course work, 38 percent never used it for research, and 45 percent never had to use it in outside reading assignments. Twenty-three percent seldom used the foreign language for any of these activities.⁶

Foreign Language in Business Administration

With this background in the historical development, use and misuse of the foreign language requirement for completion of the doctoral degree, the candidate for a doctorate in business administration is found in a strange predicament. Business administration is often found in a separate portion of the graduate programs in doctoral-granting institutions. They aren't strictly a social science because business administration, at least at the master's level, prides itself as a professional program. However, the doctorate is a very prestigious program at universities and is usually drawn tightly under the protective umbrella of the graduate school dean. Business administration then finds itself alongside the natural sciences, traditional social science programs, and the humanities. Because the foreign language requirement has been traditionally applied to the traditional doctoral programs, business administration doctoral candidates also are expected to satisfy the requirement if they want to receive the coveted Ph.D.

Survey Results

To determine the current status of the foreign language requirement for the doctorate in business administration, a mail survey was sent to the 79 U.S. colleges and universities who grant the Ph.D. in business administration and the 19 schools who award the D.B.A. as the terminal degree. The response rate was a respectable 67 percent of both the Ph.D. and D.B.A. schools. While the survey covered many aspects of the doctoral programs, the foreign language portion of the questionnaire contained some interesting facts. Of the 53 responding Ph.D. schools, only five programs still require a foreign language for completion of the degree. Of these five, only one requires competency in more than one language.

When critics have voiced their concern over the value of the doctoral language requirement, often the point has been made that mathematics is a language and why can't an applied mathematical language such as statistics, a specific computational tool or a computer language be substituted for the foreign language? When this question was asked to the five program respondents, the answer was that four of the programs would permit a substitution. Two allowed a computer language to be substituted, two permitted an advanced statistical tool and one would allow either. Only one program insisted on the candidate completing the foreign language. Within the D.B.A.-granting schools, only one respondent required a foreign language but that particular program permitted no substitution for the language.

When it was asked who gave the language exam, four of the programs, including the one D.B.A. respondent with a language requirement, stated that the foreign language department on campus would be the evaluator of the candidate's foreign language ability. One respondent said that either the business administration or the foreign language department could test the candidate in the language area. One college said that both campus departments would test the candidate in the foreign language field.

What is the impact of the foreign language in the doctoral programs? The responding schools granting Ph.D.s in business administration reported 673 doctoral graduates in 1985 and the D.B.A. programs graduated 83 in 1985. These 756 graduates represent 86 percent of the 876 business administration doctorates tabulated by a recent AACSB survey.⁷ The programs with a foreign language requirement graduated 146 business administration doctoral students in 1985 (142 with a Ph.D. and four with a D.B.A.) which represents 19 percent of the graduates of the responding schools.

Are the doctoral candidates permitted to substitute a computer language or statistical tool for the foreign language? As previously stated, the survey shows that only one of the Ph.D.—and one of the D.B.A.—granting schools would not allow such a substitution. These two schools had five doctoral graduates in 1985.

Summary

In summary, the foreign language requirement portion of the doctorate in business administration, whether it's the traditional Ph.D. or the professional D.B.A., has been effectively removed. The numerous authors who have pointed out the questionable value of a language requirement as administered in a doctoral program have apparently been heard and their advice acted upon.

Notes

1. Everett Walters, ed., *Graduate Education Today: The Doctor of Philosophy Degree* by Moody E. Prior (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1965), p. 58.
2. W.C. Wolf, Jr., "Have You Noticed The Changes In Doctoral Study?" *The Clearing House* (Sept., 1980), p. 41.
3. Bernard Berelson, *Graduate Education in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), p. 196.
4. James Harvey, *The Student in Graduate School* (Washington, D.C.: American Association, Jan., 1972), p. 40.
5. Berelson, *Graduate Education*, p. 197.
6. Ann M. Heiss, *Challenges to Graduate Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970), p. 115.
7. American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, *Newsline*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (St. Louis: AACSB, April, 1986), p. 7.