



Preface

In the spring of 1781, members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences met in the County Courthouse in Boston to discuss the areas of study that should “principally engage the attention of the Academy” in the years ahead.

The Academy had been founded only one year earlier by a group of statesmen and business leaders—including John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and James Bowdoin—who were, as the American Revolution was nearing its conclusion, planning to create a new country. Their goal for the Academy was “to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.”

In setting an agenda for the Academy, its members were also establishing an intellectual program for the new nation. They focused on practical inquiries that would have real consequences for scientific discovery, for the expansion of commerce, and for the encouragement of a productive civic life—studies in mathematics and astronomy, vegetation and minerology, medicine and history. Among the first ten topics they identified as key to both the Academy’s and the nation’s future was the study of language.

The Academy’s founders understood that the study of language in the United States was a complex and varied endeavor. They supported inquiries into “the rationale, genius and idiom of the English language,” but they also encouraged examinations of Native American languages and of linguistics more generally. They believed that an appreciation for the plurality of languages would improve communication domestically and internationally, and help the new nation understand its place in a changing world.¹

Two hundred and thirty-five years later, in 2014, a bipartisan group of members of Congress asked the Academy to take up the question of language again. Responding to a world that seems infinitely more complex than at the nation’s founding—driven by a global flow of people, capital, technologies, and ideas that has brought the multilingual world closer than ever before—four members of the United States Senate and four members of the House of Representatives signed two letters requesting that the Academy examine the nation’s current capacity in languages and recommend actions “to ensure excellence in all languages as well as international education and research.” (See page 39 for the Congressional Letters.)

This report, authored by the Academy’s Commission on Language Learning, is a response to that request.

Endnotes

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