

Dr. Richard E. Langston: Why Language Matters the Most in a Divided World

By Dr. Richard E. Langston

In times defined by global conflict and digital overload, we often talk about connection — yet we rarely slow down to understand one another. Whether scrolling through international headlines or watching stories unfold in places unfamiliar to us, we view the world through the narrow lens of translation. Yet behind every translation is a world of depth and culture — of literature, humor, and human experience — that too often goes unseen.

Across the country, college students are turning away from language study at an alarming rate. The Modern Language Association reports that U.S. enrollments in foreign-language courses have dropped by more than 15 percent over the past decade. During times when global awareness and empathy matter more than ever, we're seeing fewer students equipped with the tools to understand other cultures firsthand.

That's a loss not only for academia, but for society. Language is one of the most powerful ways to break down stereotypes and build bridges. When students read Dostoevsky in translation or learn to pronounce a single word of Ukrainian correctly, they're doing more than studying grammar — they're developing critical thinking skills that extend far beyond the classroom.

At UNC–Chapel Hill, the Department of German & Slavic Languages & Literatures (GSLL) is taking a practical approach to a national problem: rethinking what global learning means in 2025. Our faculty design courses that connect language to real-world issues — from media to literature, politics, and identity — helping students see how language shapes every field they study. Many of our classes, from Marxism and Literature to The Viking Age and Yiddish Literature of New York, are taught in English, making global perspectives accessible to all Carolina students, regardless of their language background. Others, like Russian 101, offer accelerated paths for those ready to dive deeper and meet their foreign-language requirement in less than a year.

Our faculty believe language study shouldn't feel intimidating. It should feel like a space to engage with the world in a deeper, more human way. By fostering small, discussion-driven classrooms, hosting extracurricular community events, and supporting innovative new courses, we're helping students reconnect with the global conversation that defines our time.

In a world that often feels divided by difference, studying another language reminds us that understanding isn't effortless — it's earned. It's something we practice. And at Carolina's Department of German & Slavic Languages & Literatures, we're making sure that practice continues.

Editor's Note:

The UNC Department of German & Slavic Languages & Literatures offers courses in German, Russian, Polish, Dutch, and other European languages and cultures. Learn more at gsll.unc.edu.