

April 22, 2009

Professor Joseph Travis
Dean of the College of Arts and Science
Florida State University

Professor Lawrence G. Abele
Provost and Executive Vice-President for Academic Affairs
Florida State University

Dear Dean Travis and Provost Abele:

I am writing to you as President of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. The AAASS, which has nearly 3000 members, is the largest American organization of scholars, educators and other specialists in Slavic, East European and Eurasian studies. Our members range from experts on language and literature, to historians, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, sociologists, and specialists on international relations.

We are very concerned by Florida State University's proposed elimination of its undergraduate degree program in Russian and its graduate (MA) program in Slavic, which we gather would result in the dismissal of three faculty members (Nina Efimova, Lisa Wakamiya and Robert Romanchuk), two of them (Efimov and Romanchuk) are tenured. We understand that these decisions will not be final until the state legislature adopts proposed budget reductions and the FSU Board of Trustees approves program cuts and faculty layoffs. I am writing now to try to convince you that reversal of these decisions would be in the best interest of your university and in the national interest of the United States.

As you know, Russia studies have long had an important place in American higher education. Their importance is undiminished and in some ways greater than ever today. Recognizing the importance of the largest country in the world, still a nuclear super power and with growing political and economic influence and key interests that both complement and clash with our own, the Department of State officially considers Russian to be a "critical needs" language. Much more is at issue, however, than national security. In a globalized world Americans intersect with Russia far more than they did during the Cold War. And for these interactions we need specialists of the sort Florida State's graduate program has produced, and non-specialists, in all sorts of professions, who have the kind of acquaintance with Russia that FSU's undergraduate offerings make possible. Just as medical doctors need undergraduate courses in mathematics and the natural sciences, so lawyers, business people, diplomats and others who will have dealings with Russia need at least a first level of understanding of a mammoth country

that is not going away, an understanding that is dramatically advanced by even an elementary knowledge of Russian language.

At Florida State, as in most other colleges and universities, the Slavic Division is a small one. But it opens doors to other departments by providing the language training students need to study Russian and Eurasian history, culture, politics, foreign policy, and economics. In that sense Russian courses both teach Russian language and familiarize students with Russian culture and society.

As far as we can tell, FSU's Slavic Division is a thriving enterprise that has well earned the right to continue its fine work. Its first-semester enrollment in 2008-2009 was 66, far more than at some Ivy League universities, and it boasts an increasing number of inter-disciplinary offerings. Your Slavic faculty have served their profession, as well as on university, college and departmental committees, and are respected in their fields. Given the small size of the Slavic Division, and its role as a part of the Modern Languages and Linguistics Department (which we presume is not going to be abolished), we can't imagine that eliminating the Division will save a great deal of money. But we do know that doing so will damage a university that justly prides itself on providing its students with the knowledge and skills needed to live and work in the 21st century world.

Sincerely yours,

William Taubman
President, AAASS

P.S. As it happens, just two days ago a member of our Association's Executive Committee, Ronelle Alexander, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of California/Berkeley, gave a lecture at FSU on the Balkans to an audience of over a hundred. Professor Alexander describes her experience as follows: "Their questions were excellent. I was astounded at the interest in a Slavic topic. This is most certainly a thriving program and it would be grievous error to dissolve it."