

I want to urge the faculty to vote AGAINST the motion to eliminate the Russian program at Macalester. Since Gitta has spoken to the case for Russian, I want to focus largely on what I believe to be three flaws underlying this motion: regarding circumstances, practical implications, and college priorities.

My first point involves the role that contingency has played in this motion. We make it our policy that no department will be deleted from the Macalester curriculum “by accident.” Yet I think few of us imagine we’d be voting on this motion today if Rachel May had not resigned for personal reasons in 2000, and if Jim von Geldern were not, in the best Soviet tradition, defecting to study law. In other words, it IS by accident that a personnel situation came about that has made the “Russian question” suddenly appear urgent (whereby we should not forget that this personnel instability undoubtedly contributed to the problem of low enrollments from which Russian has been recovering). The most troubling factor in all this regards Jim von Geldern’s proposal to relocate his tenured position to International Studies, where he would teach international law and found a student law clinic. We have been assured that the proposal to relocate Jim is secondary to the consideration of the department’s fate—and I don’t doubt that in the strictest formal terms this is the case. But nor do I doubt that this proposal has been one of several factors driving the motion. Now, obviously EPAG is not responsible for these circumstances; I would liken them more to a jury who hears a witness say “I seen him done it,” and is then instructed to “forget” what they cannot possibly forget. Recall if you will that EPAG invited Jim to speak about his proposal at the October faculty meeting. This amounted to Jim being invited to paint an appealing picture of what he could bring to

the college AFTER a motion were passed that had not even been presented yet, and which EPAG claimed to still be deliberating. Is this not an egregious case of donkey-before-the-cartism? WHY, if the question is truly and exclusively Russian's viability, should an individual faculty member's desire for a job change have any bearing on the discussion? Let me be clear that I am not criticizing Jim von Geldern, whom I value and who has a right to pursue any job he wants. What I find unacceptable is a precedent in which an individual's decision ends up driving curriculum--or possibly becomes expedient in allowing other goals to be met. At the very least this timing permitted the committee to see the deletion of a program as a potential accommodation as much as a displacement of existing faculty.

Second—the motion's rationale talks about “practical implications,” so what are these? What would eliminating Russian gain us in purely material terms? Because, fortunately, we don't just sack “homeless” faculty, both Jim von Geldern and Gitta Hammarberg, would be relocated within the college for the duration of their tenure at the college (which could accrue to some 30 years collectively). So what is the curricular effect of relocating faculty other than to assume they'd yield better enrollments because they'd teach in English? (To be sure, Jim's proposal would change the curriculum, but, as I explained above, in an unprecedented and problematic way.) Finally, in both Gitta's and Jim's cases (wherever he ends up), new positions would be assigned with no national search and no equal opportunity procedures to (most likely) departments that already enjoy high enrollments.

Third and most importantly: where is Macalester College headed if we start deleting departments SOLELY because of numbers (and don't even pit Russian's numbers

against Russian at other schools but against the likes of computer science—in other words, we don't compare oranges with oranges, but oranges with chocolate mousse)? EPAG itself has explicitly and repeatedly stated that the problem is one of quantity and not quality, and no where is this stress on quantity more pronounced than in the word “student demand” between the quotation marks in EPAG's rationale that I read as a sign of mild embarrassment. But this isn't just EPAG; We all know that the “demand” principle contradicts those of the liberal arts, yet I challenge you to find a single Macalester planning document that is not riddled with terms like “product,” “outcome,” and, most recently, “ownership.” If we believe that motions like this one will allow the 2/3 of the faculty not here 20 years ago to “take ownership” of the curriculum, consider an analogy. I do not “own” the constitution of the United States, but consider myself privileged to be part of the culture it has generated and, even if I believe that document to be imperfect, I will think two and three times before messing around with it. Ownership is the wrong term, and so is “student demand,” EVEN if we acknowledge, as we must, that we're living in a world of limited resources. Especially in its refusal to present alternatives to deletion of an excellent program, this motion dredges up that fundamental question: do we decide that something has a place in our curriculum and provide conditions that allow it to flourish, or is our job to REACT to a market we treat like a law of nature, and to hope we can anticipate market trends or global “hotspots” so as to maintain maximum cost-efficiency (ignoring that cost takes various forms)?

And what are the implications of the argument we heard (especially at the November faculty meeting) that eliminating Russian language instruction—for clearly it is the

target--would free us up to do “exciting” things (like read Anna Karenina in English)? Of course, these comments imply that Russian language isn’t exciting, even if its home department is staffed by exceptional faculty and produces students whom we ourselves put in a recent *New York Times* ad (two out of four). The response to this is to ask back: what do we mean by “exciting” and why is that our category?

Because in the language departments the slow process of language learning precedes and pervades the “everything else”—literature, culture, etc., these departments (including Spanish) may not always seem “exciting” and certainly will never fit an efficiency model. But what IS exciting is that a new language provides a new conceptual system that turns on us and attacks the conceptual system we always thought of as “the way things are.” This already non-profitable endeavor is further handicapped by an ironic fact: to understand that you can only know a culture through its language, you have to HAVE done it, and since one of the notorious shortcomings of American culture is that language is done too seldom and too late, language learning is not likely to fare well in the efficiency model of education. The sad fact, reflected in the wording “Russian language major” in EPAG’s motion, is that we think we can KEEP Russian literature and culture in any meaningful way WITHOUT the language.

The decision on Russian is of real and symbolic importance as the first step in the process of curricular reexamination we’re undergoing, thus I would like to insert two general thoughts into the discussion. First, not only should we not risk our principles just because of “the numbers,” but if we are smart we can make our refusal to do so work for us in the capitalist world out there, especially if we think long-term, and

sometimes let penny-foolishness yield pounds of wisdom. Imagine the appeal of a capital campaign that promises an aggressive, hard-core internationalism that can truly distinguish Macalester from every other college out there spouting the rhetoric of “excellence.” Second, as we talk about “renewal,” let us not necessarily equate that word with change. Part of the reason we find our international students so well prepared is that they are the “products” of gloriously and radically old-fashioned educational institutions where student “choice,” and consequently “demand,” are foreign words. When at the November faculty meeting President Rosenberg urged us not to shy away from change “just because it is change,” his very general admonition became a vessel for each of us to fill with whatever meaning served our purpose; many assumed--without justification, I think--his words to be a covert vote against Russian. Since the rest of that meeting consisted of faculty putting words in the president’s mouth, I’m going to take the liberty of adding some of my own, and venture that he would not object if I were to tack onto his comment: nor should you *pursue* change just because it is change. Russia still matters (watch the news), and we’re lucky to have a wonderful tradition in Russian and to have a Russian, Central and Eastern European Studies program whose fate is tied the former. If we need to drain a few inches of bathwater, let’s hold onto the baby; it will do us proud.