# Increasing Black Representation *in Languages*

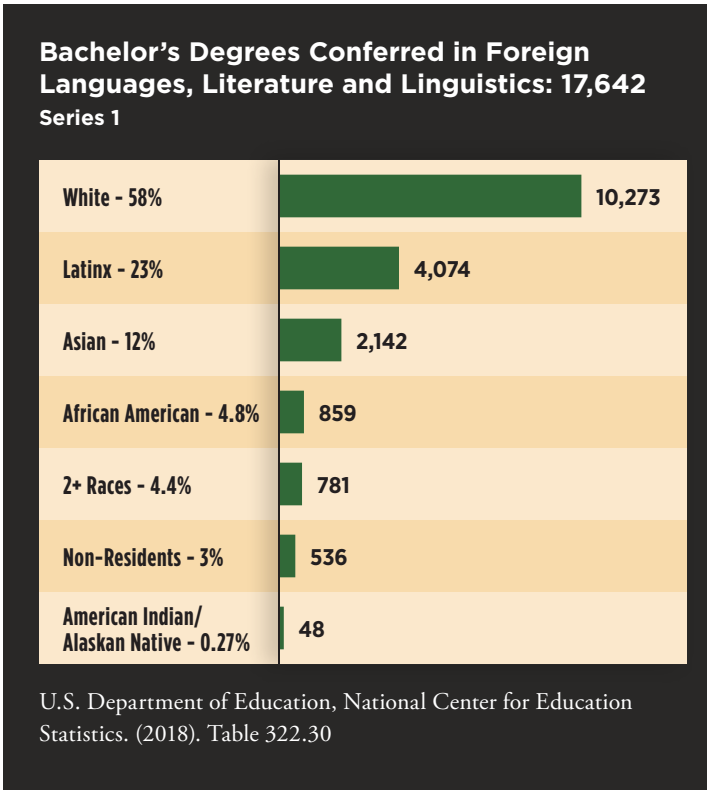
By Cassandra Glynn, Krishauna Hines-Gaither, and Tamari Jenkins

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND PRESENT

World language study seems to be stuck in a cycle of struggling to increase enrollment and retention of BIPOC students—Black students in particular—at the K–12 level. The matter of representation is complex and indicative of multiple variables including barriers that impede teacher credentialing, an unwillingness to reject long-held ideas about how and what should be taught, and most harmful, misguided perceptions of who is capable of succeeding in world language (WL) courses.

We also know from research and the literature (Anya & Randolph, 2019; Glynn & Wassell, 2018; Moore, 2005) that these factors lead to fewer Black students opting into and continuing language study. The disproportionately low percentage of Black students studying a language at upper levels in high school leads to an even lower percentage of Black students choosing to major in a language in college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, of the 17,642 Bachelor's degrees conferred in foreign languages, literatures and linguistics in 2016-2017, recipients were 58% (10,273) White; 23% (4,074) Latinx; 12% (2,142) Asian; 4.8% (859) African American; 4.4% (781) two or more races; 3% (536) non-residents; and 0.27% (48) American Indian/Alaskan Native (NCES, 2018). See Figure 1 on page 41.

Also according to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 20% of public elementary and secondary teachers are racial and ethnic minorities (NCES, 2017). "The racial and ethnic imbalance in higher education is similar to the trend in K–12 public schools in the United States where teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students" (Pew Research Center, 2018). In 2017, faculty in higher education were 76% White (non-Hispanic) while merely a quarter (24%) were non-white. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS) Completion data reveals that in 2019, the percentage of world language education degrees awarded in the U.S. followed a similar trend, with 120 degrees awarded to white graduates, 47 degrees to non-residents, and 37 degrees to




U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). Table 322.30

**Figure 1**

Hispanic or Latinx graduates (***https://datausa.io/profile/cip/foreign-language-teacher-education***). Only 3.5% of foreign language education degrees were awarded to Black or African American graduates.

These data indicate that the teacher gap persists between the growing diversity of K–16 student populations and the largely white teaching staff of U.S. institutions. In short, we are seeing little change in the diversity of either the students or the teachers in our WL classrooms in the U.S.

Although we acknowledge that there are issues of enrollment and retention among Asian, Latinx, Native American, and other minoritized students, this article will focus on Black students and teachers since they experience a very significant opportunity gap in WL education compared to white students and teachers.

The topic of enrollment and retention of Black students in K–16 WL programs is not new to the authors of this article. We have been linked for years by our passion for creating world language spaces that affirm all students, developing curriculum and teaching strategies that represent all students, and providing opportunities for minoritized students to engage meaningfully in their study of language and culture. We have discussed for years with each other and with other colleagues the need to dismantle the white, Eurocentric, and elitist approach that characterizes much of traditional language education.

Regrettably, despite our efforts and involvement in a variety of organizations, presentations, and workshops for almost two decades, we have witnessed little change in enrollment, retention, and teacher growth among Black students. In this article, we tell the story of where we believe our field has been, where we currently are, and where we could go.

## ORIGINS: Where Have We Been?

### College Language Association

The concerns addressed in this article have been raised previously. More than 80 years ago, language colleagues sought to draw attention to the needs of Black language learners. In 1937, LeMoyne College professor Hugh M. Gloster, and a colleague from Morehouse College, Gladstone Lewis Chandler, wished to offer more support to Black students in language development and critical thinking. To that end, in 1937 eight scholars met at LeMoyne and founded the Association of Teachers of English in Negro Colleges (ATENC).

According to the College Language Association archives, "In 1941, the Association broadened its objective to formally include the teaching of literature and foreign language, thus changing its name to the Association of Teachers of Languages in Negro Colleges (ATLNC). In 1949, the ATLNC officially became the College Language Association (CLA)." Today, CLA continues to serve as a platform for highly recognized and emerging scholars, as well as a mentoring hub and supportive space for Black students.

### ACTFL African American Students Special Interest Group (SIG)

ACTFL's African American Students Special Interest Group (AAS SIG) was founded in 1991 by the late Charles Hancock of The Ohio State University. In addition to Hancock, inaugural officers and early members included Theresa Austin, Sylvia Brooks-Brown, James J. Davis, Marjorie Hall Haley, Linda Lewis, Frankie McCollough, Zena Moore, Lee Wilberschied, and others.

According to Theresa Austin, language professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, "Dr. Hancock associated the lack of African American students with the lack of attention paid to non-dominant students. Also of import were the worrisome statistics of the growing diversity of students without a growing concern by the mainstream establishment such as ACTFL to address teacher education and recruit more diverse teachers."

Building on Dr. Hancock's legacy, we aim to address the lack of representation in our field. Today, under the leadership of AAS-SIG Chair Jenniffer Saldaña-Whyte and Past-Chair Kimberly Winslow, the SIG continues to work for equity and access for Black students.

## OPPORTUNITIES: What Kind of Ongoing Efforts Are Taking Place?

Social media has facilitated the emergence of affinity groups which allow for people of similar backgrounds and interests to come together, share, and commiserate in an online environment.

Founded in 2004 by Krishauna Hines-Gaither and Tamari Jenkins, African American Linguists (AAL) was established to offer a network for those who work, study, or have an affinity for world languages and who wish to promote them within Black communities. Today, collaboration among members takes place mainly on

*International Festival at Guilford College, Greensboro, North Carolina*

social media via the Facebook page of the same name, "African American Linguists" (more than 200 members).

Another group with more than 300 members that speaks specifically to Black educators in world languages, "Black Spanish Teachers: ¿Qué tal?" is a forum for sharing all things related to language education through the lens of Black interests. Additionally, with close to 3,500 members, "Incorporating Afro-Latino Culture in Spanish Classrooms" remains open to members of diverse backgrounds, but emphasizes a topic that has been of consistent importance to Black WL educators: representation in and diversification of curriculum. Administrator Jenniffer Saldaña-Whyte (SCOLT 2021 Teacher of the Year) describes it as a place where language educators can learn about and celebrate the diversity that exists in Spanish-speaking cultures.

There are also current initiatives for the development of affinity groups at the state level. One salient example is Chicago-based Spanish teacher, Kia London, with the Illinois Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ICTFL). London is the co-founder of the initiative and serves as a regional board director. She states that the purpose of the affinity groups is to reach educators of diverse racial identities and particularly to increase the number of Black educators. ICTFL plans to launch these groups in the fall of 2021.

While researching recruitment efforts for Black teachers or scholarships for Black students in world languages, one key example of a successful effort is Middlebury Language Schools' full summer scholarships for students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges, Tribal Colleges, and Hispanic Serving Institutions. However, beyond this example, recruitment efforts have been limited except in the area of study abroad. The study of world languages and study abroad seem to be inextricably linked when it comes to information and resources for Black students. The blatant linking of these two experiences can create a difficult dynamic for Black students who may feel like studying another language is already a challenging feat, without adding the expectation to study abroad.

This criterion may be inadvertently recruiting students from a background of privilege and may be more attractive to those who have sufficient resources for international travel. In *Racialized Identities in Second Language Learning: Speaking Blackness in Brazil* (Anya, 2017), Uju Anya speaks about the cost-prohibitive nature of study abroad, but she also points out the high level of concern by Black students about race-based hostilities they might experience abroad.

Some colleges are choosing to highlight the disproportionality of Black students in study abroad and publicly commit to combatting this. For example, Geneseo, a public, liberal arts college in upstate New York, has an entire section on the study abroad page of their website that is dedicated to addressing this inequity. On *African American Students Abroad* under the header called "*Why Study Abroad?*", there are links to a list of compelling reasons for Black students to consider studying abroad. It also tackles the subject of discrimination and race abroad and links students to articles, blogs, and videos with firsthand accounts of the Black experience abroad (***tinyurl.com/ycytmxt4***).

## COMPARISONS: What Can We Learn from Other Programs?

Given the challenge of effecting lasting change in our field when racism is systemic and pervasive throughout K–16 education, it may be helpful to examine steps that other fields have taken to combat issues of representation among students and teachers to positively impact the experiences of Black students.

The AP program may be able to help WL educators understand how to increase achievement and involvement in particular coursework and programs. It serves as a particularly good point of comparison because of their long history of inequity and representation in their program, similar to WL programs. The pass rate for Black students on AP exams increased 90% in just ten years between 2009 and 2019, in part because The College Board recognized the racial disparities that persisted among students and took steps to address them (Rom, 2020).

They recognized that many states in which AP programs flourish simultaneously suffer from opportunity gaps, leading them to implement a pre-AP program and requiring open enrollment to all students. They also began an early commitment pilot that required students to pay for the exam at the beginning of the school year in an effort to curb teachers' implicit bias and tendency to discourage Black students from taking the exam out of concern that they would not pass (Rom, 2020).

*Members of the ACTFL African American Students SIG.*

This is not unlike teachers' and counselors' biases about which students will be successful in world language study. These efforts on the part of The College Board are not without criticism, however. The increased growth of Black students may seem significant, but in 2019, only 4% of all students who passed AP exams were Black. Moreover, the pre-AP program is expensive, creating a significant barrier for schools in lower SES communities (Rom, 2020).

To diversify world language educators in order to better serve Black students, it may be useful to examine programs such as STEM, which have also struggled with teacher representation. Sears, Jessup and Matthews suggest that we focus our efforts at the K–12 level, and recommend that programs pique minoritized students' interest in becoming teachers while they are still K–12 students. They offer ideas such as creating opportunities for students of color to serve in teaching roles: "Teacher aides, assistants, tutors, club participation and leadership, and community outreach which features STEM education work with others" (Sears, et al., 2021) to catalyze educator identities. These ideas could easily be applied to world language education to not only create more meaningful experiences for learners, but to also allow Black students to see themselves as language learners and language leaders. However, this requires collective action on the part of teachers, administrators, and stakeholders.

For too long, pockets of passionate language educators have attempted to move the needle. We must come together. One model could be to follow in the footsteps of our history colleagues. In April, 2021, more than 180 history scholars joined the Zinn Education Project to present an open letter urging districts to incorporate often omitted historical events such as the Reconstruction era. The letter stated, "We, the undersigned scholars of U.S. history, urge school districts to devote more time and resources to the teaching of the Reconstruction era in upper elementary, middle, and high school U.S. history and civics courses." The signers also offered free resources to aid districts, shared steps that districts can take, and encouraged districts to report back on their progress as a point of accountability.

In world languages, we have never had a collective movement of language educators and professionals who have come together specifically to address language access for minoritized individuals, diverse course content, and representation. The time is now.

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## ACTION: What Can We Do Now and What Comes Next?

During 2020-2021, the nation was plagued with what many have termed *two* pandemics: COVID-19 and structural racism. We watched the world respond to the most pervasive global health crisis of the last century and we also witnessed communities in the U.S. and around the globe rise up against police brutality. Places as geographically diverse as Hong Kong, Cuba, Brazil, Nigeria, Germany, and many others stood with Black Lives Matter. How did these events impact the world language community?

World language professional organizations across the nation published statements in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others. Language conferences had keynotes and workshops that specifically focused on antiracism and social justice. ACTFL launched a "Resources that Address Issues of Race, Diversity, and Social Justice" web page (***tinyurl.com/2pj5v8yh***). Regional language organizations heeded the call to address topics that had long been absent from our discipline's discourse. The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese dedicated an entire conference to diversity, and thereby sparked national engagement.

Language departments, from early language education to higher education, offered professional development on social justice and antiracism. As a world language community, our sensitivities are heightened, we are continuing to skill build, and we are engaging in courageous conversations. What comes next?

Although not an exhaustive list, we offer 10 actionable items that we feel would take our journey to inclusion and representation to the next level.

## 10 Action Steps Toward Antiracism in World Languages

### We need to ...

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| **1.** | Acknowledge and address what needs to change in our field such as bias, underrepresentation, racism, and inequities. |
| **2.** | Engage in strategic planning that allows for collective, broad-based action, sufficient time, and resources to address underrepresentation. |
| **3.** | Build alliances within world languages and with other disciplines, organizations, and affinity groups to expand our reach, pool our resources, and prioritize common goals. |
| **4.** | Overtly name antiracism and social justice in existing language standards, guidelines and other framing documents. Draft antiracist and social justice standards that are specific to languages. |
| **5.** | Articulate the return on investment, and how languages benefit diverse communities of all proficiency levels. |
| **6.** | Recruit and mentor diverse students and candidates into language programs, teacher education and professional organizations. Draft articulation agreements between departments and institutions to start early recruitment and to sustain ongoing pathways. |
| **7.** | Review curriculum for bias and underrepresentation. Incorporate critical theories, antiracism, social justice, intersectionality, culturally responsive teaching, and decolonization. |
| **8.** | Revamp teacher education so that preservice teachers leave their programs with the requisite dispositions, beliefs, advocacy, and tools to support all learners. |
| **9.** | Review world language policies and procedures at all levels (local to national) to determine how they help or hinder progress towards equity and representation. |
| **10.** | Develop student, faculty and staff leaders in world languages who are equipped as advocates and agents of positive change. |

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*Krishauna Hines-Gaither mentoring her language student.*

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