

AN INTRODUCTION TO MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS

Multilingual students are a valued and welcome part of the Hamilton College community. While the information that follows can provide some insight into who our multilingual students are, they aren't a monolithic group, meaning the best way to support and work with them is to get to know them as individuals.

Why use the term multilingual?

“Multilingual” refers to students who communicate using multiple languages or dialects¹. We choose to use this term because it identifies speakers' knowledge of multiple languages as a skill rather than identifying speakers based on their acquisition of English, which fails to capture their unique perspectives and knowledge regardless of their English use. Terms previously used, such as English as a Second Language (ESL), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and English Language Learner (ELL), do not accurately capture the full range of Hamilton students' linguistic backgrounds or experiences, as English may be their preferred or primary language, and they may also be learning English as a third, fourth, or fifth language. Additionally, terms like “native” and “non-native” tie language use and knowledge to ideologies of nativism and xenophobia and are often associated with “the ability to inhabit and enact idealized whiteness rather than empirical linguistic practices” (Rosa and Flores 2017).

Who are multilingual students at Hamilton?

Multilingual students are not a homogeneous group but instead come from a range of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. Some are international, some are U.S. born, some are dual citizens, and some were born in another country but moved to the U.S. prior to beginning college. For many, being multilingual and going to Hamilton may be the only things they have in common, so it is important to avoid generalizing multilingual students in both their characteristics and their support.

What are multilingual students' linguistic backgrounds?

In a 2021 survey, multilingual students at Hamilton identified speaking over forty different languages, but the actual number of languages that they know and use is likely higher. Many speak more than two languages and have varying degrees of comfort in each of their languages.

How can we best support multilingual students and recognize the assets they bring to Hamilton?

Learning about your multilingual students as individuals is the best way to inform your support. You can begin to do this immediately by asking all students to answer a few questions that give you a sense of who they are; one of the questions could be related to linguistic background and another could be about what students feel works best for their learning style and/or what types of classroom practices best support their learning. Too often, multilingual students are seen as having deficits if English is not their first language, even as monolingual English-speaking students who learn other languages are lauded for their multilingualism. Educators play an important role in changing this perception by creating space in their courses for linguistic differences and valuing the diversity in communication and perspective that being multilingual can provide.

You can also help connect multilingual students to support resources on campus, including but not limited to: Multilingual Student Support, the Writing Center, the Oral Communication Center, the Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning Center, International Student Services, the Days-Massolo Center, and ALEX Advisors. Visit the Centers & Resources page for more information.

¹ Yuko Goto Butler's definition is helpful here: “Individuals or groups of people who obtain communicative competence in more than one language, with various degrees of proficiencies, in oral and/or written forms, in order to interact with speakers of one or more languages in a given society” (p. 112)

Sources

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