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Spreading the Good Word: What Student Affairs Can Learn From The Jehovah's Witnesses

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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank Dr. Jessy Li at the University of Texas at Austin for her guidance and mentorship.

Spreading the Good Word:

What Student Affairs Can Learn From The Jehovah's Witnesses

Over the past four years, I have attended almost 100 different student affairs conferences across Texas, the United States, and Canada. At these conferences, I am always awestruck at the diversity of scholarship and practice that I am so privileged to learn from as a relatively new student affairs professional. I regularly find myself attending sessions about community colleges, international students, Affirmative Action laws in different countries, tuition deregulation policies, and a myriad of higher education-related issues. I strongly believe that this incredible diversity is the lifeblood of the field of higher education and student affairs.

If you have attended a student affairs conference, or really any conference at all, the next paragraph of information is going to be extremely familiar. Usually, at student affairs conferences, there is some sort of conference program, that most recently has been emailed in a PDF file or is available in some other digital format. Before I really immerse myself in the conference, I always page through the conference program. I'm always looking for something very particular.

I'm looking for non-English languages.

In the research that I have conducted over the past few years, I have consistently criticized institutions of higher education and student affairs professionals for not making more information available in non-English languages (Doran & Taylor, 2020; Taylor & Burnett, 2019; Taylor, 2018a; Taylor 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Speaking from a strictly United States context, it is exceedingly rare to attend a conference presentation, see an article in a journal, or visit a website that is translated beyond English. Of course, unique and innovative publications, such as the *Journal of International Students*, has begun publishing abstracts and titles in the author's native

language(s). This move toward linguistic equity must be commended but also must be recognized as a small needle in a very large Anglocentric haystack. Look to student affairs websites. What language do you see? Again, Anglocentrism has pervaded student affairs.

And this Anglocentrism goes far beyond the scope of higher education research. It extends to practice.

Recently, I was speaking with an executive director of an international student office at a large college campus. The executive director was telling me about the problems that international students were having in accessing information on his institution's international student website. I quickly scanned the website and learned that most of the content was written at a very difficult English reading comprehension level... and was only available in English. When I pointed out this fact, he provided a laundry list of excuses as to why the website couldn't possibly be published in a non-English language.

But for the Jehovah's Witnesses, linguistic equity is what they do. Visit jw.org.

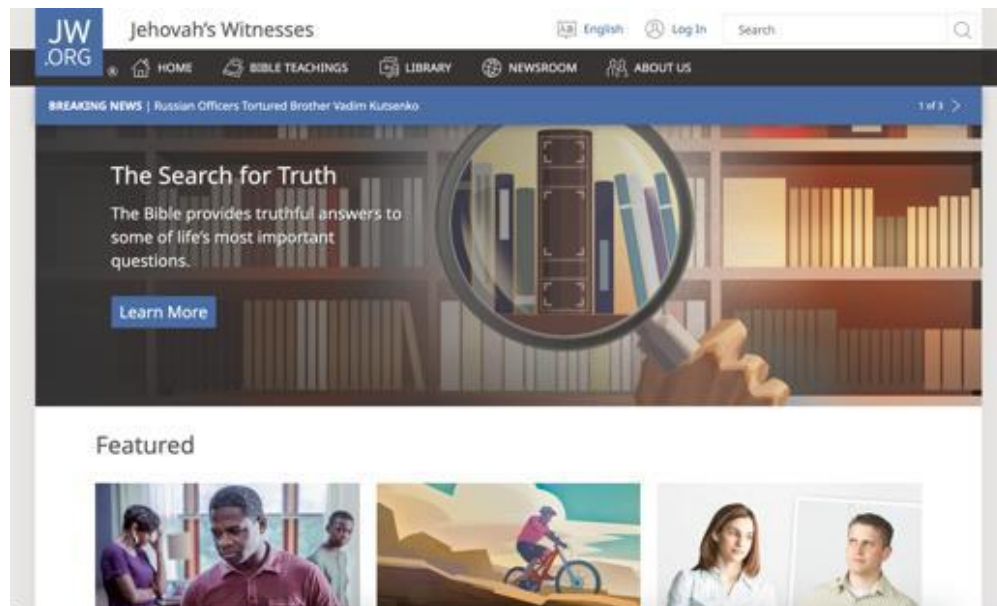


Figure 1. Screenshot from The Jehovah's Witnesses website at www.jw.org (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2020a)

Then look in the upper right-hand corner of the screen and click on the little box that says ‘English.’ You will be greeted with a screen that looks a little bit like this:

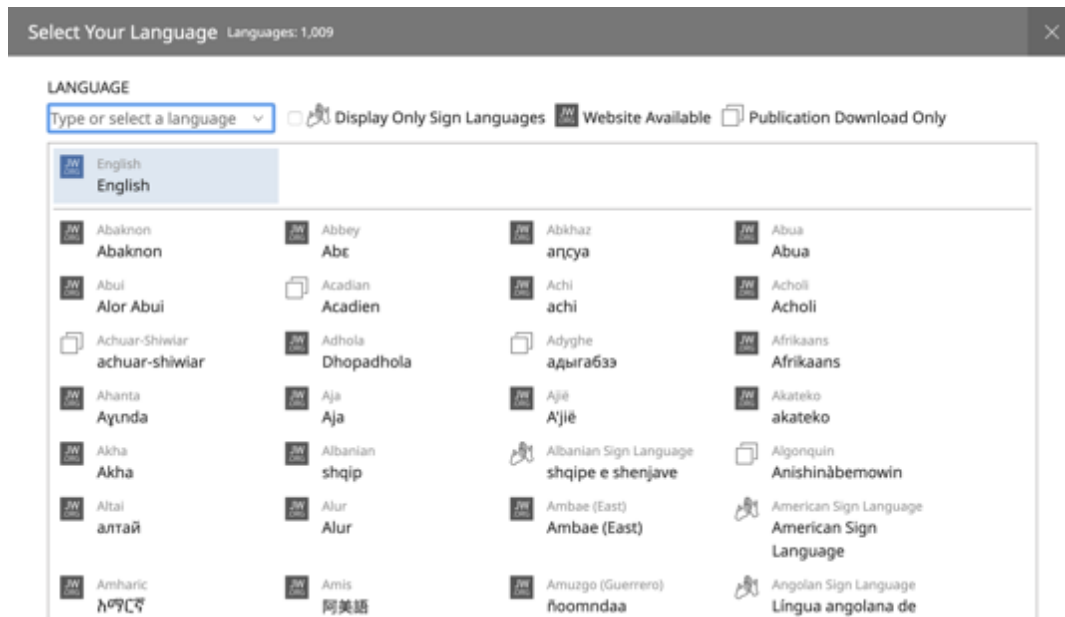


Figure 2. Screenshot from The Jehovah’s Witnesses website at www.jw.org (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2020b)

1,009 languages. Think about that number for a moment. And then scroll through that list of languages and come to the slow realization that the Jehovah's Witnesses have made nearly their entire website available for over a hundred different language populations, including making content available in sign languages. In my professional estimation, the Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the most linguistically equitable organizations on the Internet. I dare you, but you will not find an educational organization of any kind that produces anywhere near the amount of translated content for diverse language populations than the Jehovah's Witnesses do.

Granted, the Jehovah's Witnesses boasts over 8.5 million members and is a branch of the Christian religion with a large foothold in the United States. In fact, if you grew up in the United

States, you have likely answered a knock on the door, and behind that door has been two nicely dressed men preaching the word of God and asking you to have a conversation.

To be clear, I am not a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and I am not attempting to say that one institution of higher education would have the access to diverse language populations that a religious organization with 8.5 million members has. But surely, in my own state of Texas, student affairs webpages and institutional websites could at least translate their landing page from English into Spanish...

But they don't.

From here, student affairs researchers and practitioners must remain steadfast in their pursuit of equity along racial, ethnic, gender, age, religious, and many other lines of human identity. But one of those identities must be linguistic identity, and we must continue advocating for linguistic equity in higher education, including student affairs. I have attempted to make a small impact on the community by integrating Russian, Japanese, and Spanish language journals into my own education journals database (Taylor, 2018b). Organizations like ECHER, NASPA, and ACPA have been very purposeful in their recruitment of professionals from different countries and with different linguistic backgrounds. But student affairs writ large can do more.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have laid down the linguistic equity gauntlet for student affairs. And as the Jehovah's Witnesses spread their own good word, we must do the same in as many languages as we can.

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