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## HOW TO PROSPER DURING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CRISIS

THE depressing climate in which the language-teaching profession has operated during the past decade has been the subject of innumerable articles and speeches. One risks being numbed by the repeated expressions of despair, until the wreckage is surveyed. Too many departments have had to fight for their very existence. Some have been decimated; a few have even disappeared. Responses to the crisis have ranged from lamentations about the sad state of education in the United States to concrete suggestions for pumping new life into our beleaguered field. In a paper published in the *ADFL Bulletin* (10, No. 4 [May 1979], pp. 13-18), Richard Brod pointed to some encouraging signs of creativity. Brod alluded in particular to the Dartmouth Intensive Language Model and to those who were inspired by this program, but he cautioned that "institutional commitment is one of the most significant factors determining the success or failure of any language program" (p. 16). How can we win such commitment when so often the cards appear to be stacked against us and when few of us can aspire to the type of support offered by the Dartmouth administration?

What follows is one example of what can indeed be accomplished under adverse conditions. Faced with declining enrollments, handicapped by an atmosphere inconducive to language study, and threatened with the extinction of its major program, a relatively small foreign language department found the means to ensure its survival, to lay the foundation for a thriving program, and to revitalize the study of languages on its campus.

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), a branch campus of the University of Maryland, serves some six thousand undergraduates, many of whom specialize in sciences or preprofessional programs. The Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at UMBC consists of thirteen full-time faculty members. It has offered the B.A. degree in French, German, and Spanish, plus courses through the intermediate level in Russian. When general university requirements were liberalized in 1970, students no longer had to take a foreign language. Languages became one of four academic "areas," from which students were to choose three. There was not widespread interest in foreign language study among incoming students (or among university faculty); and the student body had no incentive to opt for the language requirement, which was generally viewed as difficult, time-consuming, and of little practical benefit to them. Predictably, enrollment in modern languages declined over the next few years. As more and more budgetary constraints were imposed on the university, our department came under intense pressure to raise its

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FTE enrollments. Finally, in spring 1977, the administration warned us that we would lose faculty lines unless we found a way to increase dramatically our overall enrollment. The loss of several lines would have seriously impaired our ability to function as a department and would have relegated us, at best, to the role of a "service" area. We were thus shocked into the realization that the entire language program was at stake and that we would have to act or go under.

After receiving the administration's ultimatum, the members of the department initiated a series of planning sessions to study the problems facing us and to seek solutions. We first underwent an intensive self-examination to identify the factors that were contributing to our difficulty. We concluded that our program was not suited to the needs and interests of our students; that some way would have to be devised to bolster enrollment, principally by attracting nonmajors from the university at large; and that a determined effort was needed to raise the consciousness of the campus regarding the advantages of language study.

Our essential concern was reshaping the curriculum; we felt that the resolution of this matter would lead to the solution of other problems. We were fortunate to be supported in our efforts by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Aided by two grants from NEH, we reconceptualized our entire program.

In considering new approaches to curriculum, we were determined not to be overly concerned or inhibited by what already existed at other colleges and universities. In other words, we gave foremost consideration to our local situation; we thought of our students, our institution, and our surrounding community and of the effects alternatives would have on all of these. We sought something we could *realistically* do, given the particular conditions in which we worked; and we were absolutely committed to maintaining or even improving the quality of our program. At the same time, we were guided by our desire to use our faculty resources fully and effectively.

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The process of restructuring began with a thorough evaluation of student interests, abilities, and goals. This evaluation was accomplished by formal and informal discussions and by a written questionnaire administered to all foreign language classes. The questionnaire revealed what discussions with students had led us to suspect: over 80% indicated language was their primary interest, while only 10% expressed a strong interest in literature. From the beginning, the curriculum in the modern languages at UMBC, like that of most other universities across the nation, had been oriented toward the study of literature—largely because of the traditional postgraduate training of the faculty. Yet foreign language students have never been less interested in a literary major, a fact made obvious to us not only by the questionnaire but, above all, by the painful experience of underenrolled literature courses. It was thus clear that, for reasons both intellectual and professional, the interest of our students was focused on language skills and cultural studies. This was a reality we could no longer ignore if we hoped to build a successful program and rejuvenate language study at UMBC.

We judged it neither practical nor prudent, however, to deemphasize literature and then merely offer as a major the language and civilization courses that remained. Nor did we wish simply to tack a few new courses onto the existing curriculum and rearrange the major requirements, like so much window dressing. We proposed to create a whole new context for our program, in which literature would play a more appropriate role. Instead of occupying the top rung of a hierarchy, it would join language and culture as an essential component in the foundation of a more balanced program, in which interrelationships among the three would be stressed.

In our planning, we were also conscious of the need to establish a sense of continuity between lower- and upper-level courses. Students who enter an elementary or intermediate course are usually concerned with building language proficiency and learning about a foreign culture. (What better reasons are there, in fact, for taking such a course?) If these students continue on to the advanced level, they do so primarily because they are interested in refining language skills and deepening their understanding of the culture. Too often, students have been startled to find a chasm between the lower and upper levels, because the advanced curriculum (and major program) is heavily oriented toward the study of literature. When literature becomes an end in itself, the term "foreign languages" is a figment. It would be enlightening to learn how many prospective majors abandon their study of a language for this reason. We hoped to avoid this all-too-common situation by devising an upper level that would proceed naturally from the basic lower-level courses, build on them, and strive to fulfill the goals that motivated students to begin their study of the language in the first place.

In sum, the changes we envisioned involved not only

the development of new types of courses but also the establishment of a new kind of language-major program at UMBC—one that would make more sense in terms of the interests, capacities, and aspirations of our students, on the one hand, and the particular talents of the faculty, on the other.

### The Core

The most significant proposal to emerge from the planning sessions was an outline for just such a program: a new B.A. in modern languages to replace the separate major programs in French, German, and Spanish. There would be a set of options for a specialty in one language, two languages, and literary studies. (The structure of the new program will be explained in more detail further on.) Articulation among the three options would be established by a "core" of courses dealing with language, literature, and culture, to be taught in English and taken in common by *all* modern language majors. Thus, our first order of priority was to devise the core, since it would be the heart of a truly departmental major.

Interestingly enough, the concept of a core program for all language majors was not based on any kind of a priori decision; it resulted from an arduous examination of the whole range of failures and successes of our existing program. Although an analytical discussion makes it almost mandatory to differentiate between success and failure, in actuality various elements and factors were so intertwined that we could only observe a particular dynamic at work. But it was in considering the levels of interaction in our language programs that the idea of a departmental core took hold.

First among practical considerations was the nagging problem of courses with low enrollments. Amid this generally grim situation, there was little to comfort us—except for the stunning beginning of a brand new course. A year before, the dismantling of a Humanities Committee on Interdisciplinary Studies had left us, as a legacy, a course that the department had been determined to launch; the World of Language was an introduction to the phenomenon of language, an exploration of the great variety of languages surrounding us, and an examination of ways of analyzing them. This two-semester sequence had already shown great appeal to the students and had an enrollment above 120 for two consecutive semesters. Beyond the positive response elicited by this new offering, we realized that the course provided a commendable (or even necessary) foundation for students majoring in languages. Enrollment, the content of the course, the perception that it served a definite need in language studies—all these elements combined to produce the success we were witnessing.

The establishment of a departmental foundation course for language students led us to the reflection that the typical structure of a department of languages—commonly housing several languages and administra-

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tively organized like Russian nesting dolls, that is, a series of departments within a department—generated substantial overlapping and even duplication, at a time when we could least afford it. A salient example of this situation is undoubtedly the standard course on textual analysis of literary language that every language area offers in one form or another. This state of affairs had created in our small department at least three such courses with enrollments below ten in each. We asked ourselves if there could not be one such course for all language majors.

Another area of dissatisfaction was the curricular “provincialism” that permitted the segregation of French, Spanish, and German students for no other reason, it seems, than territorial jurisdiction. More serious, the existing program was giving students a limited view of their field. We thought that the French students’ competence would be enhanced by knowledge of the Spanish-speaking world, and vice versa. And special attention to the interaction and interrelations among languages was deemed not only positive but more than desirable in a world where nation states are increasingly made to realize their interdependence. The need to underline interaction and interrelations proved to be one aspect of the larger problem, namely the one of “global awareness.” In other words, to teach languages meaningfully and in context we had to familiarize our students with the linguistic map of the world and introduce them to contemporary issues in languages. Again, we wondered why such a course could not be developed.

A major purpose of the core, then, was to address these concerns, which were preventing us from functioning cohesively and economically. After considerable discussion, we agreed that the core would consist of three courses, to be taken by all foreign language majors.

### The World of Language

Designed one year earlier, the World of Language was to become the first core course. As indicated above, the course is essentially an introduction to the concept of language and a presentation of various codes of communication; it is grounded in the latest linguistic research. We realized that such a course would constitute an ideal starting point for all modern language majors and would give them a better conception of the workings of whatever language(s) they chose as their specialty. It also became obvious that the course had great potential as a possible elective for nonmajors, especially for those who did not opt for the language distribution requirement but did want to study problems of communication.

The World of Language consists primarily of a team-taught lecture series. Language majors must take at least one semester of the course. The first semester begins with the question of the definition of language—visual, auditory, and other sensory and social codes; animal and machine communication; verbal and nonverbal com-

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munication. The course then goes on to examine everyday communication, ranging from slang and informal conversation and writing to more formal uses of language. Language strategies are considered within a variety of cultures.

The second-semester course explores the many ways to analyze language, its truth or falseness, its historical function, and its role in intercultural communication. The course examines a variety of idioms, such as those of the scientist, the historian, the politician, the poet, the child, and the magician. Also included are techniques for finding information about language usage.

The success of the course is attributable not only to its subject matter and approach but also to our faculty’s preparation and effectiveness in team teaching. As indicated before, student evaluations have been extremely positive and have encouraged us as the rest of the core offerings were developed.

### Textual Analysis

This course builds on the grounding in linguistics and language strategies offered in *The World of Language*, either semester of which serves as its prerequisite. Textual Analysis teaches all language majors (as well as nonmajors) theories and techniques of analytical reading and interpretation that apply to texts of all kinds. The objective is to sharpen the students’ ability to understand and evaluate various forms of written and pictorial material. The potential benefit to language majors is obvious; moreover, nonmajors are able to apply the skills they acquire in this course to their own fields of specialization.

Textual Analysis includes both theoretical and practical components. Students are introduced by lecture to the functions involved in the communication of a text. All types of texts are studied, from those most prominent (and seemingly most trivial) in the students’ daily life to the most poetic. Students are then asked to gather and analyze samples from the popular press, from legal documents, and from historical, political, medical, and scientific writing, as well as from literary prose, drama, and poetry. The course also examines the relation of written messages to visual codes (advertisements, cartoons, photography, painting, film, etc.) and to musical codes (song, opera, etc.). Students learn to approach this diverse material from the points of view of the producer of the text, the receiver, the message, the code, and the context.

The course consists of two hours per week of lecture in English and one hour of workshop either in the language of primary specialization—French, German, Spanish—or, for nonmajors, in English. Workshops provide practice in textual analysis by means of individual and group projects.



## World Language Communities

This course, to be taught for the first time in fall 1980, is designed to expand the cultural awareness of the typical UMBC undergraduate by introducing the study of language in a broad context of historical, political, and social issues. Besides being required of language majors, it is especially recommended for students in humanities, bilingual education, and social sciences and for those seeking an international perspective in their education. Participants in foreign study programs should find the course an excellent preparation for living in a different culture, and it also provides valuable insights to those who reside in a multicultural American city.

Beginning with the myth of Babel, World Language Communities examines various theories of language origin and traces the development of the philosophy of language to the present. Diverse schools of thought—such as those represented by Whorf, Sapir, Chomsky, and Skinner—are presented.

The course then goes on to study the geography of language, the great language families and their divisions, and the historical changes that influenced their development. Issues discussed should include the impact of colonization and linguistic imperialism, the role of religion, and the suppression and/or extinction of minority languages. These sociolinguistic problems also serve to introduce the question of bi- or multilingual states, such as the USSR, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Spain, Finland, and South Africa, and of the explosiveness of the language issues in many of these areas.

After the student learns about the complexities of the worldwide language situation, we use the United States as an example to point out the pertinence and applicability of language issues in everyday life. Students examine immigration practices, the international role of American English in business and science, the range of problems confronting language minorities, and official government policies regarding the use of English.

The format of the course includes lectures, discussion, audiovisual presentations, and guest speakers.

On the whole, we feel that the core affords special advantages beyond its own intellectual value. The core courses foster interaction among the language areas in our department and serve to integrate the various elements of the curriculum into a more coherent entity. They also provide a meaningful context for the study of languages. Above all, they constitute an excellent introduction to the universal concepts and processes of language by successively introducing the students to (a) the phenomenon and nature of language itself, (b) its structure and its relation to meaning, and (c) its social context—in other words, the common ground that underlies our discipline.

### The Major Program

Once the concept of the core was developed, we refined

the structure of the major program. Our goal was to create a program of high quality and broad appeal that students would find flexible and useful. Our plans were based on the analysis of student interests, abilities, and professional objectives mentioned earlier. We found, for instance, that although a double-language B.A. was beyond the reach of most of our students (because of the high number of credit hours involved), many still took advanced courses in a second language—not only to develop their intellectual interests but also to better their chances of finding a good position in an increasingly competitive job market. It seemed to us that there was a need to recognize officially what had actually become the norm and to respond to the overwhelming student interest in language skills and cultural studies.

The various language majors at UMBC were therefore transformed into one B.A. in modern languages—with options for specialties in one language, two languages, and literary studies. The *one-language option* serves those who still prefer to major in just one language. This option requires twenty-six hours above the intermediate level in the single language (in addition to nine hours of core). It combines exceptionally well with concentrations in other academic areas; it is the choice of most students who plan a double major. There are individuals in our program who have combined language with fields in which knowledge of a foreign tongue is a valuable asset—including health sciences, geography, social work, business, economics, political science, psychology, and fine arts—to create attractive and highly useful double majors.

The *two-language option* is the most popular of the three options. Although the total number of credit hours required is higher than that of the one-language option, it was necessary to lower the number required in each particular language. To do otherwise would have created a monumental obstacle course for our students, thereby pricing us out of the market. Accordingly, majors in this category select a language of primary concentration, entailing eighteen credits above the intermediate level, and one of secondary concentration, involving twelve credits above the intermediate level (plus nine hours of core). There are those who might claim that reducing the number of required courses in a given language is undesirable and that the greater the number of courses the better. If one followed this line of reasoning to its ultimate conclusion, one could clamor for an astronomical number, in the name of increased fluency. We have observed, however, that the greatest strides in foreign language studies are made at the early stages of specialization; once a student reaches a certain point, increments in proficiency (excluding those derived from study abroad) become smaller and smaller. Then, too, gains in proficiency depend not so much on the amount of material that is taught as on the effectiveness of the teaching itself.<sup>1</sup> Actually, the credit hours indicated represent a *minimum*. Students are encouraged to take more courses in their specialties, if possible, and most do. We feel that this

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option offers optimum flexibility and professional benefit and that it constitutes a realistic response to student needs.

The third option, called *language and literary studies*, accommodates the student interested in literature. Instead of providing the traditional series of offerings (e.g., "century" courses) in the individual literatures, however, we have attempted to fashion a truly departmental literary major. It includes twelve hours above the intermediate level in one language (plus nine hours of core) and eighteen hours selected from a group of general courses in literature, taught in English and dealing with a wide range of topics and national literatures. (More will be said about these courses later.) Students in this category build a proficiency equal to that of the second language in the two-language option and approach the study of literature from an international viewpoint rather than within the narrow framework of a single national literature. We also familiarize these students with new methodological approaches to literary texts.

Although restructuring the major program and establishing the core were high priority items, considerable attention was also given to the course offerings in each of the individual languages. Above the intermediate level these offerings had consisted largely of a series of literary courses, arranged chronologically and including some genre and author studies. This approach reflected an orientation that had not changed since the opening of the campus in the 1960s, when foreign language students were still abundant in literature courses and even had to pass a comprehensive examination based on a reading list. Reports of concern from secondary schools, suggesting that colleges and universities were producing literary specialists with serious deficiencies in foreign language skills, were all but disregarded. The enrollment problems described earlier forced us to modify course lists that had long appeared sacrosanct. The number of literature courses was reduced, and new offerings in language skills and culture were introduced. The literary courses that remain are broader and more flexible in format than earlier ones. The list of course offerings in each language now reflects a more balanced approach to the study of foreign language, literature, and culture.

The core binds the three program options together. The core courses are, in turn, part of a series of general offerings on aspects of language, literature, theater, film, and culture, which were created to appeal as electives to nonmajors. These courses, including the core, are identified by the initials MLL (the initials of our department) and are taught in English. They have proved highly popular, drawing students from all areas of the university, and have resulted in a great boost in enrollment.

In addition to increased enrollment, one of the most pleasing benefits to accrue from the wide popularity of our MLL courses has been a new audience for our foreign language classes. Students who might not otherwise have considered taking a language have enrolled in foreign language courses after their exposure to aspects of

language, literature, and international culture in the MLL offerings.

### Conclusion

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It is obvious to us that the restructuring of our program has been successful and that the academic soundness of the curriculum has been maintained. We are in a much healthier position today than we were three years ago. Our enrollment has jumped over thirty percent. We now enroll over one thousand students a semester, at a campus with a population of six thousand and with no across-the-board language requirement. In addition, the number of language majors has increased to sixty, an all-time high for our department; and the campus is now aware of our strength and vitality (thanks in part to our efforts to publicize the new developments).

There are several reasons for the dramatic improvement in the department's fortunes. First and foremost is the new program itself. Students have responded to it very positively. We had begun our planning with a student "needs assessment"; and while the faculty did not allow this concern to eclipse their own judgment of what was best for the curriculum, we were gratified to find that the new program reflected rather well the goals that motivated students to undertake the study of languages. The focus on communication, oral and written performance, and cultural understanding has struck a responsive chord among students at all levels. Also, the very structure of the program has proved a major asset. At the lower levels of study, students build a basic proficiency in the foreign language(s) of their choice while gaining a theoretical background in language and communication through the core. With this preparation, they then proceed to advanced work in one of the options. We feel that this structure provides a model for a logically sound approach to the study of languages.

Especially in developing the core, we took into account the strengths of our faculty in linguistics, semiotics, theories of communication, and the social context of language. Individual faculty members were instrumental not only in devising the core courses but also in passing on their enthusiasm to their colleagues. Through weekly department seminars, these faculty kept the rest apprised of the evolution of the core and introduced the basic concepts underlying the courses in development. These seminars, by the way, have proved so enlightening that they will continue.

Other reasons for our heartening experience are perhaps less tangible but equally critical. A major benefit of the new program structure has been a renewed sense of unity in the department. It was obvious that we had not functioned cohesively under the old format, as there was little or no coordination among the three language programs and each area was concerned with its own interests. In short, because we were divided we could not plead our case effectively in the university. The members of the faculty now feel that they have a common mission,

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and this belief has been a crucial factor in whatever successes we have enjoyed. The departmental scope of the major has given us an identity beyond that of our narrow fields of specialization and has enabled us to speak more forcefully in furthering the cause of foreign languages.

There is also a new spirit among our students. They no longer feel isolated in their little national enclaves. They are instead quite conscious of the common interests they share with other foreign language students (largely because of the core and the departmental B.A.) and they have developed a feeling of solidarity. Preoccupation with the language of primary interest has not overshadowed their identification with the larger academic discipline. From previous experience both here and at other institutions, we can testify that this is a rare and welcome phenomenon.

None of the above would have been possible without a large measure of cooperation among the members of the department. As we reshaped our program, there were some sharp debates. A number of compromises were necessary, but a consensus was almost always obtained. We saw that we would have to put aside the parochial interests of our particular fields of specialization and seek what was best for *foreign languages* as a whole. Without a recognized and fully functioning language program, it would have mattered little that we possessed Ph.D.'s with a specialty in eighteenth-century French literature, twentieth-century Latin American literature, or whatever.

We are not proposing ourselves as a model for everyone to follow. We did what we thought was necessary, considering the nature of the problem and the character of our students, faculty, and institution. It is not so much the particular approach we adopted that we

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are recommending but, rather, the *process* we went through to arrive at that approach. Foreign language departments must make a realistic appraisal of their situation and be prepared to reconsider priorities, if necessary. Faculty must overcome territorial jealousies and start thinking about the health of the field to which we all belong. To do otherwise will invite further deterioration of our position. It is hoped that the UMBC experience will encourage others to act in response to the crisis that faces our profession. There will be no *deus ex machina*. The solution must come from within.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>The more skeptical reader will no doubt question the foregoing arguments. Through experience, however, we are convinced of their validity. We make every effort to use the most effective methods of instruction and to increase our students' exposure to their chosen language. The emphasis throughout is on communication skills. We try to give our elementary and intermediate students a running start by having them meet once a week in small groups for conversational practice with an instructor who speaks the target language natively—this in addition to using the language lab. We also make extensive use of media (film, video, etc.) at all levels, in our superbly equipped lab and media center. For instance, film has been incorporated into several courses, and in others student drills, reports, and dramatic skits are videotaped, played back, and analyzed. In addition, we have active language clubs, language lunch tables, and successful intersession programs abroad. To state the case conservatively, we would say that our current students are no less proficient than their predecessors who took more credit hours in a literature-oriented program.

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## Community College Humanities Association Meetings

The Community College Humanities Association (CCHA) is holding five divisional meetings this fall on the general theme *The Role of the Humanities in Community Colleges*. All conferences feature invited speakers and panel presentations, papers, and short workshops.

Both the Central and the Southern Divisions have scheduled their first annual conferences for 3-4 October 1980. The Central Division, which holds its conference at Rock Valley College, Rockford, Illinois, has as keynote speaker Martin Marty, the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor in the History of Modern Christianity at the University of Chicago and a member of the Commission on the Humanities. The Southern Division, in conjunction with the Florida Community College Consortium for Arts and Humanities, meets in Sarasota, Florida (Sarasota Hyatt House). The keynote speaker is

James M. Banner, Jr., chairman of the American Association for the Advancement of the Humanities.

On 10-11 October 1980, the Eastern Division holds its conference at Berkshire Community College, Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Mark Curtis, president of the Association of American Colleges, will give one of the major addresses.

The Pacific-Western and Southwestern Divisions have scheduled their inaugural conferences for 17-18 October 1980. The Pacific-Western Division meeting in Seattle, Washington (Airport Hilton Hotel), features an address by Dale Tillery, professor of higher education at the University of California, Berkeley, graduate school. The keynote speaker of the Southwestern Division conference, hosted by Tarrant County Junior College (Fort Worth, Tex.) and held at the Holiday Inn, Mid-Cities (West), Bedford, Texas, will be Gaines Post, Jr., executive director of the Commission on the Humanities.

Registration information for any of these meetings may be obtained from CCHA, Union Coll., Cranford, NJ 07016.