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Using Student Expectations and Perceived Needs to Rethink Pedagogy and Curriculum: A Case Study¹

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ABSTRACT Because the mission of language departments in large research universities was traditionally the training of graduate students in literary analysis, less attention was devoted to the teaching of lower level language courses. Recently, however, revitalizing language programs has become a major concern for many departments. This study discusses a case of such revitalization at a major metropolitan university. The paper presents results of a pilot study aimed at assessing students' needs and redefining the goals and objectives of a traditional French language program.

Introduction

Traditionally, language departments in large research universities have seen as their mission the training of graduate students in literary analysis, and have given less attention to the teaching and training of teachers of the undergraduate language courses. Recently, however, basic undergraduate education has come under increased scrutiny. More attention has been devoted to the renewal and enhancement of the undergraduate curriculum (*Columbia University Record* 1996; Branch 1998), and—because of both shifts in student enrollment patterns and budgetary constraints—revitalizing language programs has become a major concern of foreign language (FL) departments. As a consequence, change has become a necessity: While traditional FL departments are working toward designing curricula which better meet their student needs (Chaput 1993), institutions are prepar-

ing to better coordinate FL instruction on a campus-wide basis (Branch 1998; McAlpine 1998).

Because of the variety of issues affecting FL instruction, meeting student needs is a well-known challenge, particularly in a general education context. In fact, as Richterich (1983) suggests, it is not at all obvious that outcomes will match what students perceive as their needs. Having an idea of what students expect, however, helps make informed decisions.

The present report has several objectives: (1) to sum up the results of a pilot study aimed at assessing student needs in a French language program at a major metropolitan research institution in which the language program is currently being restructured; (2) to compare the needs of these students to those of others surveyed elsewhere; and (3) to outline future goals of the designated French language program by addressing the issues of program revitalization through needs assessment.

The report uses data from three sources: (1) a survey of students enrolled in a sampling of courses taught by the participating French language program; (2) meetings and interviews conducted with the faculty, the staff, univer-

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