

The Future of German in American Education

Summary Report, July 1996 Heidi Byrnes, Georgetown University

(Published in the AATG Newsletter, Vol. 32, No. 1, Fall 1996, pages 4-8)

I. Introduction

During the past academic year the AATG has conducted three regional invited fora (at Anaheim, Washington University, St. Louis, and Georgetown University) and a session at the Chicago MLA on a topic that has gained renewed interest and urgency: "The Future of German in American Education."

At these fora, colleagues considered undergraduate, graduate, and institutional administrative matters, teacher education, and the articulated curriculum. Their wide-ranging expertise, professional experience, untiring dedication, and practical know-how underlie this summary Report which I, as the convener and coordinator of the events, present to the AATG membership in terms of the project's two goals:

- (1) Clarifying the issues facing the German profession by placing them in a larger socio-political and educational context, and
- (2) Developing a prioritized list of possible actions the AATG as a professional organization could and should undertake.

Given our preference for deliberativeness over action I am concerned that we reach the second goal and a subsequent implementation phase by

- Discussing the Report's contents within the profession; e.g., through the AATG electronic listserv;
- Reaching a consensus regarding the actions the AATG wishes to take, both short-range and long-range. I urge all AATG conference participants to attend an open meeting on **Saturday, November 23, 10 - 11:15, Convention Center Room 102, A-B** at the Annual Meeting in Philadelphia;
- Seeking funding sources, creating focused groups, and finding individuals who will assume responsibility for implementation of specific projects. The internet discussion and the Philadelphia session are the most appropriate way for AATG members to indicate their willingness to participate;
- Taking regional and local actions that place the Report's recommendations in specific contexts.

I invite and look forward to your response, in thoughtful comments and in action, as we work together to strengthen the presence of German in the United States.

II. The Educational Environment for the Study of German in the United States

1. General Characterization

Educators have associated many societal changes with the corporate world only (e.g., downsizing, restructuring, total quality management, outsourcing, accountability, access) or, at most, with public K-12 education. However, by now these shifts undeniably affect all of higher education as well as private education. For us, too, measures of organizational effectiveness are becoming constituent-based. The customer--consumer, patient, and now the student-- is the transforming force and our work is being seen through the lens of the delivery of valued outcomes, not as a self-evident good.

Two major points recur:

- (1) the concept of accountability (e.g., vis-à-vis local, state, national legislative and fiscal units; institutions and their varied constituencies) is no longer a passing phenomenon; and
- (2) incremental changes at the margins may well be insufficient; indeed major structural changes are already being piloted (e.g., different governance of departments and programs, new forms of budgeting based on performance criteria and outcomes, greater reliance on long-distance education, reconsideration of tenure).

The new "competency-based education" emphasizes individualized learning and measurable outcomes while demanding access to educational opportunities for all students. It gains additional force through the transforming power of technology which dissolves the past privileged practice of a single, standard learning environment, institutionalized for students around seat time requirements and for college faculty around teaching loads in terms of hours in the classroom. Along with reconsidering the process of learning and teaching we are also changing the nature and status of areas and types of knowledge: what kind of knowledge is crucial for responsible and rewarding citizenship in the American democracy in the twenty-first century?

These considerations occur in a constricted fiscal environment and a declining public willingness to support educational expenditures. As a result, major responsibility for educational policy making and for financial responsibility is being relocated from federal initiatives and directives to state, local, and individual initiatives, resulting in different funding priorities.

2. Impact on the Field of German

For the field of German the following developments and their consequences were identified:

- demographic changes that favor certain languages, both nationally and regionally
 - German is increasingly a college-level subject only, much like the less commonly taught languages;
- a change in the make-up of the profession (less an immigrant group)
 - redefinition of the field of German or *Germanistik*, with repercussions for the content of the field, faculty priorities in research and teaching, and the role of the German language;
- demands on teachers made by communicatively oriented language instruction
 - need for continued in-service work and faculty development, with regard to language ability, curriculum construction, and pedagogy, where the collegiate reward system provides few incentives for change;
- closing of programs at all levels of instruction, sometimes due to low enrollments, sometimes due to demand (and fiscal consequences) for other language programs
 - tightness in the academic job market, leading to lack of interest in an academic career, irrespective of educational level;
- increasing pre-professionalization of college curricula
 - curricular prescriptiveness that restricts electives; drop in language requirements;
- reduced usefulness of German (in light of demographic and economic realities and the dominance of English in many academic disciplines) and perceived difficulty of German;
- increased demands from colleagues, programs, disciplines across institutions for certain kinds of programmatic foci
 - inability to meet these demands (e.g., insufficient breadth of knowledge about the cultural area and within the disciplines; limited support in terms of materials and awareness of pedagogy for advanced and professional level use of German; therefore continued preference for a grammatically driven approach that unduly generalizes experience in the introductory and intermediate classroom);
 - possible loss of intellectual identity due to overwhelming “service” demands from other units of an institution or through various cross-disciplinary linkages;
- down-playing the use and usefulness of German language abilities in order to facilitate link-up with other constituencies (e.g., disciplines, programs, professional groupings)
 - loss of language ability in graduates, with particular repercussions for the future quality of language instruction.

The groups concluded that, for the field of German, two seemingly opposite courses of action and attitudes are required and must be interwoven continuously in order to achieve “A New Positioning of German.”

- reaching out (intellectually, programmatically, administratively) beyond our normal boundaries, whatever their instantiations, and
- critical and honest reflection about our identity and unique contributions to American education and about realistic and effective ways to strengthening the presence of German.

3. Special Opportunities - Potential Obstacles

This new positioning is possible only to the extent that all members of the profession work collaboratively. Maximal effectiveness may well favor conceptualization on the national level, but success depends on carefully planned and executed actions on the local and regional level. This requires sophisticated knowledge on the part of all members of the profession, particularly those in leadership positions; it presupposes a high level of commitment and engagement, and a well-articulated sense of common purpose, even vision. Last but not least, it demands excellent lines of communication so that successful partnerships (e.g., regional, across institutional types and educational levels, issue-oriented) can be formed.

The German profession is fortunate to have a number of favorable conditions for such complex and substantive cooperation: e.g., a well-run and highly effective executive office; support through the Goethe Institute and the DAAD, as well as other funding agencies, a number of highly visible curricular innovations (e.g., German across the curriculum) and, most importantly, dedicated teachers at all levels of instruction and, in general, a competent and committed professional leadership.

However, serious obstacles exist as well:

- a K-12 environment that can be extraordinarily demanding (e.g., teaching several languages, split appointments between several schools, large classes, multiple levels, range of student abilities), tedious (repetition of German I and II), and administratively and financially unsupported and isolated (e.g., little support for professional development needs or outreach work even when colleges are near-by);
- teacher preparation models that separate pedagogical preparation from the disciplines, resulting in lower prestige of this kind of work (particularly the methods course and TA supervision); no careful planning of pre-service and in-service development;
- a reward structure for collegiate faculty which favors institution-independent knowledge creation over institutionally moored service and teaching;
- insufficient preparation of department chairs for their bridging roles between faculty and administration;
- bifurcation of the curriculum into a language and a content component and the resultant split in faculty status; most recently, this has led to “outsourcing” of language instruction, thereby endangering the viability of the remaining content component;
- little inclination for serious discussion of curriculum and pedagogy since faculty have highly specialized research interests but insufficient knowledge of advanced language teaching and learning and collaborative curricular work;

- inappropriate materials and assessment practices which become the *de facto* curriculum and pedagogy;
- graduate education which must prepare specialists in the discipline and generalists for a wide range of institutions;
- the financing of graduate education which results in inexperienced apprentice teachers (TA's) handling the bulk of language instruction;
- institutional competition and restricted resources that do not automatically favor collaboration.

Though the above points are by no means unique to us, their combined impact on the German profession is now being felt harshly in certain areas of the country. Others have not yet experienced precipitous declines, nevertheless notice highly unfavorable signs.

III. Recommendations

The groups identified five interrelated areas for critical attention if German is to flourish in the future:

1. The Curriculum in Terms of Content and Delivery System

Reforming curricula at all levels of instruction is the most important task for the German profession in the United States. The need for such reform is greatest at the collegiate level, both undergraduate and graduate. The key concept is articulation: vertical articulation assures integrated sequences of study, horizontal articulation seeks linkages to other areas of the curriculum. Reforming curriculum comprises academic and co-curricular (including study abroad) components. Among the most important recommendations are:

- Replace an additive model of language learning (e.g., first mastery of the formal inventory of German, then content knowledge, then culture, then literature, then access to professional subfields; first oral then literate use of the language) with a holistic model that integrates linguistic and cultural knowledge right from the beginning in a fashion that is appropriate to the educational level/age of the learner;
- Provide for multi-year, long-term integrated sequences of instruction across instructional levels that aim at usable, preferably advanced, German language abilities;
- Create high-quality programmatic linkages across the curriculum/discipline which consider the student population of a given institution (e.g., GAC, German for specific purposes, such as engineering, business);
- Explicitly connect the faculty's content interests with the crucial language learning/teaching enterprise to help students, undergraduate through graduate, acquire academic literacy in German. Articulated and integrated curricula can provide the critical intellectual foundation for a department and send powerful signals that all faculty take joint responsibility for the entire program.
- At the graduate level, assure that all students, irrespective of program emphasis, attain high levels of German language ability and differentiated cultural knowledge and insights ("multiple literacies"). Departments need to shift from a near-exclusive focus on Ph.D. studies to creating multiple exit points (diverse M.A.'s) and making connections with a variety of professions and employment opportunities. For the Ph.D. this means including non-academic career paths as a deliberate option, not merely a default position. The number of Ph.D. graduates who ultimately attain tenure-track status in the academy is no longer the only indicator of program quality. The whole field may wish to begin a loosely coordinated effort aimed at differentiating emphases in American Ph.D. programs; at the very least, programs need to advertise honestly their level of expertise in a given area.
- Participate in the core curriculum by teaching "German" topics in English. However, two opposing forces may result: (1) build-up of an intellectual presence for German within the institution, accompanied by increased enrollments in German courses; (2) loss of scarce faculty resources to courses taught in English and insufficient attention to the departmental curriculum that is taught in German, resulting in the loss of German as a defining focus.
- Determine realistic goals for German at the end of K-12 instruction and develop assessment instruments that reflect students' task-based communicative language abilities in various modalities, not only their grammatical accuracy. A first effort might focus on developing rich descriptors for students who have had three years of precollegiate German instruction.
- Based on that information, develop collegiate language programs that build on students' extended performance profiles rather than privileging grammar and lexicon as formal entities only. This shift alone would dramatically change the delivery system of college language instruction (e.g., beginning graduate students may not be able to teach such courses).
- Develop model articulated curricula and materials for German on two tracks:
 - a) pre-collegiate instruction with the potential for articulated collegiate instruction;
 - b) collegiate instruction only.
- Understand institutional practices that help or hinder enrollments: e.g., work with admissions office to reach incoming students who have placed out of the language requirement; consider placement and credit rules (e.g., "retro-credit"); put strongest teachers in second year courses to encourage third year enrollments; address enrollment minima and cost-intensiveness of language instruction with faculty assignments in language courses (enrollment averaging).
- Consider technology not merely as an optional add-on but as potentially reshaping the entire language learning construct (e.g., individualized, student-centered learning, access to on-line information, task-based learning, linked learning with native speakers of German, distance learning in areas where German programs can otherwise not be supported, language maintenance, specialized programs).

2. Outreach and Student Recruitment

Inclusive and active recruitment for students was identified as the second most important task facing the profession. Enrollment at the K-12 level is crucial since almost all future college majors make that choice on the basis of satisfying pre-collegiate experiences with learning German.

Our difficulties in attracting students into K-12 classes have many causes, some well beyond our control. However, surprising turn-arounds are possible when energetic leaders make savvy use of information about the institution, initiate bold and highly visible initiatives, cultivate contact with school boards and other administrative levels (e.g., principal, counselors) and parent groups, and are familiar with priorities in the region and state and the institution's respective position among its peers. FLES/exploratory options, before or after school, on a paid basis or as enrichment, may have to be supported through course development and teacher training. Also, the AATG may have to initiate a concerted effort to involve diverse "middle persons" who make critical decisions regarding German, whether these are within education (with a range of professional affiliations) or in the community at large.

New students may need to be found among non-traditional groups, in terms of age (e.g., young children, returning and career change students), educational path (e.g., GED students), different income levels and academic profiles, and expanded career goals that include German. Far from lowering standards, this approach recognizes that academic quality in general and the viability of continued literary studies and students' interest in majoring in German often depend on linkage to expertise in another field, whether an academic discipline or a profession.

Comprehensive advising which makes students aware of multiple possibilities in conjunction with German is crucial. Often students need this help in order to discuss a German option successfully with their parents. At the college level this includes

- connections with or placement in regional industry,
- summer internships here and in German-speaking countries,
- campus activities for German students,
- creation of a co-curricular transcript,
- creation and use of portfolio which attests to their development, and
- career placement help.

3. New Approaches to Accountability

While the demands for accountability are frequently interpreted as threatening and as narrowly focused on new modes of testing/assessment/evaluation, accountability should be seen positively and comprehensively. In fact, a carefully considered revitalized curriculum is probably the best way to respond to our constituencies' call for accountability.

Beyond that, accountability in terms of assessment pertains not so much to individual students' scores on national standardized tests as to continuous program enhancement which is undertaken to assure students' growth over a period of time within a specific German program.

Portfolio assessment has been suggested as a suitable response. The entire profession should therefore address the development, evaluation, and use of such student portfolios at all levels of instruction.

4. Teacher Education and Faculty Development

The German profession's ability to reform curricula and attract students is only as good as the education its teachers and faculty receive in preparation for their work. The following suggestions were made:

- Coordinate teacher education between the FL methods faculty member, the education department, the cooperating teacher, and the student. Rewards and recognition need to be adjusted accordingly;
- Coordinate TA training across multiple language departments;
- Support teachers who are interested in broadening their expertise base (e.g., German teacher as the assessment specialist, the technology expert, collaborating with the science or social science teacher);
- Consider a language proficiency requirement for German teachers;
- Foster a mentoring culture that interprets broadly the role of future German teachers (e.g., advocacy, recruitment, community relations, co-curricular programs, opportunities for student recognition);
- Develop model teacher education programs;
- Encourage dual certification for German teachers.

5. Governance, Structures, and Leadership

The third major area of action identified was the quality of departmental leadership.

A number of institutions have recently restructured their "language departments" (e.g., appearance of language centers). This trend deserves close scrutiny since, depending on the institutional setting, it can create a very favorable environment for a cultural studies program with a high level of language competence just like it can be a thinly disguised move to close entire language programs. More importantly--and striking at the heart of the matter--it often reveals insufficient departmental leadership, together with faculty's unwillingness or inability to act in the interest of program viability and substance for the benefit of their students instead of their own.

As a consequence the creation of a leadership seminar evolved as the top action item the AATG should pursue. The goal of such an event would be to familiarize participants with:

- **Strategic planning/setting priorities** (as opposed to “trying to cover the waterfront”), which demands reflection on the mission of the discipline of German, of the institution, the department, and the nature and level of quality contributed by a given German program;
- **Benchmarking**, involving the drawing up of a list of peer institutions and sets of criteria for assessing program quality;
- **Resources**, current and projected, as these are required in relation to quality program of different configurations, and how these might be allocated in the face of potential budget cuts or structural realignments;
- **Audience** served: who and how well, with what kinds of linkages to other programs and what outcomes;
- **Curriculum**, in relation to the needs of the audience, potential changes with regard to content, format, and delivery system
- **Creativity/innovation** (to replace “business as usual”) that addresses possibilities for innovation, particularly with regard to technologies and distance learning;
- **Departmental leadership** which encourages involved priority-setting and decision-making;
- **Administrative models** and their repercussions for the delivery of departmental and institutional goals as these are expressed in the respective mission statements.

IV. Summary: A Proposed Action Plan for the Profession

The groups made a number of recommendations for actions that the AATG as a professional organization should implement as expeditiously as possible. Some resources will be required. However, by far the biggest resource is the willingness of members of the AATG to devote themselves to collaborative action. Since much could be accomplished through carefully coordinated information gathering and dissemination efforts, the AATG should devise innovative ways of using the available electronic media (e.g., internet, e-mail, WWW, CD-Rom’s). Relatively modest expenditures (e.g., to graduate students who could set up and keep current certain lists) might bring high benefit to the profession. Also, some form of “traffic control” for this German electronic superhighway may be required so that AATG members will continue to access it.

The following recommendations are listed roughly in prioritized order:

- ***Develop a leadership seminar***

The need for visionary, innovative, and highly effective leadership at all levels made this a high priority action item at all for. The leadership of “foreign language departments” (chairs, program heads, language coordinators, undergraduate/graduate coordinators) is targeted in recognition of the fact that this is the customary administrative unit in K-12 education and increasingly also at the college level where separate German departments are on the decline. With its inclusive and institutional focus, such a seminar (perhaps of a week’s duration), might be able to tap multiple funding sources within education and outside of it (Department, school district, Dean/Provost; Embassies; industry). Perhaps it could be coordinated with the MLA’s Association of Departments of Foreign Languages. It should be developed in two versions: (1) for K-12 faculty leaders, and (2) for collegiate faculty leaders, and should be offered across the country by major regions according to institutional feeder relationships and enable participants to begin to develop specific action plans to be implemented in their institutions within a multi-year strategic plan.

- ***Support curricular reform***

- In K-12;
- In undergraduate programs, for the “language” sequence and all “content” courses (this includes literature as a “content” area);
- In graduate programs.

- ***Develop pilot programs/models for articulation***

- In regions with well-established feeder relationships and through regional collaboratives, focus on curricular articulation between high school and college;
- Support such projects with innovative assessment initiatives;
- Develop models for language learning that span the entire undergraduate sequence.

- ***Encourage and disseminate information about models for excellence***

The AATG should help prepare or assemble and subsequently disseminate information about models of excellence, including *criteria for excellence*, regarding

- Curricula that integrate language and content teaching
 - * articulated curricula that connect precollegiate and collegiate teaching
 - * freestanding collegiate curricula;
- Materials requirements for an integrated curriculum, articulated or freestanding, in German (conceptually akin to the FL Standards document); guidelines might be prepared, with wide dissemination to publishers and the FL profession;
- Assessment of program quality;
- Assessment of language competence at key points (e.g., at the end of high school, at the end of the required sequence, for language teachers)
- Teacher preparation;

- Graduate student mentoring;
- Student recruitment models
 - * K-12 focus
 - * High-school to college
 - * Within the college.

Devise ways for official recognition of efforts under the above rubrics

(e.g., recognize programs that have particularly supportive mentoring cultures for graduate students, successful regional collaboratives, innovative recruitment or advocacy programs)

Plan for the strategic use of technologies to advance information gathering and sharing on issues that pertain to the entire profession

- Facilitate focused (perhaps monitored) electronic discussion on previously announced topics which is limited in time. This would benefit many programs who face remarkably similar issues and who often need to act decisively on short notice;
- Devise an electronic information sharing system on the following topics:
 - * Syllabi for German-focused courses offered within the general education component of colleges; similarly collect syllabi for GAC efforts, arranged by major delivery models;
 - * A data bank of program profiles, particularly graduate programs; a task force/working group should first develop criteria for standardizing electronic data entry; the information should be linked with the AATG Web site;
 - * Internship possibilities and foci of study abroad programs.

The AATG expresses its gratitude to Heidi Byrnes, Georgetown University, for her leadership in organizing these fora.