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Ensuring a Flourishing (German) Department: A Dean's Perspective

When I served as dean at the University of Notre Dame from 1997 to 2008, I spent considerable time evaluating academic departments. Having introduced incentives and assessment strategies for differential funding, I would like to share some of the allocation principles a dean is likely to consider as well as some departmental best and worst practices. I will also recall a few examples from my 12 years, including five as chairperson, at The Ohio State University. Some insights will be more specific to research universities, but most of what I share will apply to any German program on any campus. Indeed, much of it applies to departments in general—and that is one of my main points.

The principles and suggestions cover three levels. First, what makes any department a source of funding and support? Second, what strategies can be employed by language and culture departments, irrespective of language focus? Third, what strategies might be distinctive to German departments? I have tended to bracket insights from an earlier essay of mine that explored a related topic, “Strategies for Enhancing the Visibility and Role of Foreign Language Departments,” although most of those suggestions would certainly be relevant here as well.

I

First, what makes any department a source of funding and support, and what role does the dean play in this process?

The major responsibilities I had as dean likely do not differ greatly from the work of many other deans. Four duties focused on vision and implementation of vision via budget and accountability: overall vision and strategic planning; fund raising and external representation and advocacy; major budgetary priorities and decisions; and departmental reviews and evaluation. Three tasks centered on personnel: the hiring of tenured faculty members, including external recruitment to full professorships and endowed chairs; tenure and promotion decisions, including renewal appointments; and the appointment and review of associate deans and chairpersons. The final dimension involved leadership development within the college, including playing a broadly pastoral and community-building role.

A dean's capacity for influence, then, lies in crafting a vision, which must resonate to some degree with the vision both above and below her; in obtaining and allocating resources, that is, in the budget; in making personnel decisions; and in whatever social capital she may have.

How does a dean set priorities, a concept that links the all-important categories of vision and budget? I introduce here six possible considerations. Most are broadly applicable. First, all great universities seek to be strong in certain core disciplines. These tend to have large numbers of faculty and majors, such as biology or history. Second, some disciplines acquire prominence in a given age. Because economics is central to modernity, all excellent universities today seek to have strong economics departments. To take another example, world events have dictated new investments in Chinese and in Islamic studies. Third, some universities because of their distinctive vision invest in various programs: a Catholic university, for example, in philosophy and theology. These initial three principles are so important that if a department that falls within one of these categories is weak, a university is likely to marshal resources to try to fix the problem in a way that it might not with a less central program, which as a result has less of a safety net if it should for some reason self-destruct.

Fourth, in allocating resources, a dean gives considerable attention to not only the normative sphere of vision but also the descriptive sphere of facticity, which is highly influenced by data. Large enrollment shifts over time necessitate the reallocation of resources. At Notre Dame, for example, both anthropology and economics have for various reasons grown in student and faculty numbers.

Note that German is unlikely to surface under any of these four categories. Two other parameters remain, however, and here German is a more likely candidate. Fifth, every dean sets her own priorities, and a German department would do well to make the case for what it values, that is, to help form the dean's vision. If German becomes a priority, you are in good shape, but that, too, is unlikely. More commonly, a dean may prioritize language and culture programs more broadly. Between my tenure and that of my successor, so for fourteen years running, language and culture programs have been among Notre Dame's priorities, and during that time, they have flourished. Language enrollments increased by well over 1,000 students, majors rose by more than 40%, new languages and new majors were introduced, new funding was obtained, and faculty size grew dramatically. In such an environment German is likely to flourish.

A more intriguing and challenging, if no less appealing, rubric arises when the dean says that she wants to advance *x*, and the German program is, or will itself to be, strong in *x*. *X* could involve the quality of undergraduate advising, the integration of curricula across departments, internship opportunities for students, the development of graduate students as teachers, graduate student

placements, faculty mentoring, or any number of other issues. Ask yourself, what are the dean's priorities? If senior theses are a priority, encourage senior theses. If funding is important, find a foundation or other donors that will support you. At Ohio State, for example, we obtained funding for three departmental initiatives: a recurring visiting professorship, a German House, and a summer program in Dresden. Usually the dean's priorities are not absurd, and so it makes sense to try to advance them.

The final angle is disarmingly simple. Every dean is looking for stellar programs in which to invest. Most deans are not ideological and are simply looking to find and nurture strong programs. Selective excellence is a basic principle of contemporary higher education. If you are excellent, you will flourish. What criteria determine excellence? These will vary from institution to institution, but again the matter is not overly opaque. They are likely to include generic factors such as high standards for hiring, tenure, and promotion; effective and inspiring teaching at all levels along with healthy enrollments; scholars with outstanding publication and grant records; excellent leadership, including chairpersons with vision and the courage to make difficult decisions as well as a range of supporting leaders; and a selfless spirit and strong sense of intellectual community, whereby the whole of the department is greater than the sum of its parts. A case for excellence can be made by comparison with similar departments externally or with other departments internally.

Some examples may be helpful. As dean I did not initially intend to prioritize anthropology and sociology. Among the social sciences, economics is a more defining discipline. Because of their large numbers, political science and psychology are higher-impact programs. But at Notre Dame, Anthropology and Sociology, which were not stellar when I became dean, did enough to merit additional resources. With changes in personnel, Anthropology moved from an embattled department with few students to one of the most collegial and dynamic departments in the University, with large numbers of students, including a remarkable number active in faculty research projects, and an external review that recognized "one of the top undergraduate programs in the country" (Colgagno et al. 5). Sociology likewise made excellent hires, persons who turned down multiple offers from higher-ranking programs; they, too, engaged large numbers of undergraduates in research; a superb chairperson emerged; and in one external ranking, based on prestigious journal publications, they climbed from 74th to 24th to 5th in less than a decade (Markovsky; Jones et al; and Hausmann et al.). Such departments invite investment for sheer excellence. Another example: While I served as chairperson at Ohio State, German was designated one of five privileged departments in the college and a recipient of selective excellence funding. I'm quite sure the dean was completely indifferent to the relative importance of German as a discipline; he simply wanted to invest in a program that was doing well according to criteria he valued.

Arguably the two most important factors that hold a dean back from allocating resources to departments that might otherwise merit them are lack of departmental vision and lack of departmental leadership. One wants to invest in programs that have ambitious and meaningful goals and the leadership to realize them. Because languages and literatures were a priority for me as dean, I set aside early in my tenure \$100,000 in annual-rate dollars, the equivalent of \$2.5 million in endowment, for an initiative, yet to be defined, in the foreign languages and literatures. In my early years I had other, more pressing priorities and so banked the money, using it for one-time initiatives elsewhere, and waited to see what good ideas might surface from the ranks. Nothing compelling emerged. I then appointed a committee, which filed its report after two years; it was both slow in arriving and unpersuasive. I held on to the resources. Some years later I charged another committee with the question: how can we best improve advanced language learning and the flourishing of the foreign language and culture majors? The committee came back with little intellectual or academic substance, no answer to my question, and an unconvincing recommendation that since a few peer and aspirational peer universities had superb language centers, we needed one too. I told them to come back with an answer or set of answers to my question. They finally did, and we put together a memorandum of understanding. The departments would do a number of things—such as enhance recruitment efforts, increase contact hours in beginning courses, offer extracurricular conversational opportunities, expand their curricula, introduce pre- and post-study abroad activities, and develop assessment strategies—and I would invest in peer tutors as well as a language center. It is now a flourishing entity. A dean who did not see the overriding importance of languages and cultures would have said after the first failed report, I will simply invest elsewhere, and that would have been a rational decision.

A dean quickly learns the debates of the respective disciplines, such as the value of integrating language and culture at all levels, but with so many departments to oversee, she will focus more on results—for example, the percentage of students retained beyond the language requirement or the numbers of majors and Fulbright recipients—than she will on the more insular debates that tend to preoccupy departmental members and even chairpersons.

What additional advice for German programs qua generic departments can I offer in their dealings with a dean? Mostly common sense:

- Be constructive. If you see a problem, bring forward one or two possible solutions.
- Be a straight shooter, so that when something important arises, the dean will trust you.
- Show how you can improve both with and without new resources.
- Be a leader on formal issues, such as articulating learning goals or combating grade inflation, which will allow you to stand out among other departments.

- Keep the dean informed of successes but don't overwhelm her with trivia. Know what is worth relating, since the dean suffers from a burden of too much useless information. When a distinction merits recognition, give the dean some context. Help in advance with a press release or offer to write the public relations office.
- Help the dean craft her vision. I did not read the 2007 MLA report until it was forwarded with a note from one of our language chairpersons. After reading it, I introduced a new program that supports faculty of all disciplines who wish to learn foreign languages, with the goal of not only supporting the faculty but also having them model for students foreign language learning and competency.
- When making a request, consider the concerns of the dean. When I arrived at Notre Dame as a chairperson, I obtained two new lines in German partly by promising the dean that all the hires would be broad-ranging intellectuals and so able to teach in the College's core course if enrollments in German were ever to dwindle.
- Think like a dean. When I wanted the provost to write to a faculty member who had accomplished something especially meritorious, I offered to send along a draft letter. When I wanted the president to call or meet with a prospective faculty member, I gave him talking points. Chairpersons should do the same for their deans.
- Be entrepreneurial. At Ohio State we converted two departing faculty lines to fellowships, so that we were able to fund graduate fellowships more generously and increase the number of fellowship quarters for graduate students. I reasoned that we would likely have lost the lines in any case, but, more importantly, we did not need the courses offered by those faculty. We needed more competitive, but fewer, students and stronger support. For the dean, who later became a provost and then a president, this became part of his story: internally reallocating resources to invest in priorities. A dean wants to have a story to tell—because she sees its intrinsic value, because she needs constantly to make the case to donors, or because she will someday want to move to a better position. Give her that story.
- At the other end, avoid problems that cost the dean time or hold back your department, such as internal struggles or mediocre tenure recommendations or a failure to keep pace with the initiatives and advances of neighboring programs.

II

Second, what strategies can be employed by language and culture departments in general?

The simplest answer is to ensure that the department fosters what makes any foreign language and literature department excellent: superb teaching at

all levels; a broad array of interesting course offerings, not only language and literature but also culture and other subjects, including truly interdisciplinary offerings; a flourishing study abroad program; and a strong sense of intellectual and social community, especially for students. The latter is almost a secret weapon: college students are looking for an institutional home and a meaningful sense of collective identity; a smaller department should be able to provide an intellectual community much more effectively than a department overrun with majors.

If one is then objectively excellent, the next step is to tell one's story. To whom? To the dean of course. To prospective donors. Above all, to current and prospective students. That includes, for example, writing to every first- and second-year student who has an A or A- at the lower levels and inviting them to consider majoring in your subject and writing to the high school teachers who already send the highest number of successful students into your program, praising the progress of their former students and encouraging the teachers to send you others. Note the small classes, the integration of language and culture, whatever stands out as a mark of distinction.

In terms of linking vision with reality, if your institution speaks of globalization, ensure that your programs are part of that concept. If they are not, point out the contradiction. Preparation for a global society does not mean elevating German over Chinese or Spanish. One needs to start with the generic case. In a still broader way, faculty should make the general case for majoring in the liberal arts.¹

Although I have always believed that getting students abroad is essential to language advancement, not until we developed a summer program in Dresden on behalf of Ohio State did I recognize a frequently overlooked strategy—getting students abroad very early. If one can get students abroad for six to eight weeks after their first year, two things happen. First, they advance linguistically in leaps and bounds, especially if they know how to take advantage of their time outside the classroom. Second, they develop an emotional connection to the country that inspires them to continue. At Notre Dame we found funds to send a high number of students abroad over the summers; for the summer of 2011, for example, we awarded funding to support more than 70 students, including 13 undergraduates at the Goethe Institut or its equivalent. That does not count a high number of additional students going abroad for research projects, internships, and service projects. Past students were tested before they left and after they returned. The average increase for 6–8 weeks of intensive study was 1.58 levels on the ACTFL OPI Scale, the equivalent of more than 3/4 of a year of college foreign language course work. Beyond having intrinsic value, such results inspire further donations.

One could name many other best practices for foreign language programs, and certainly one way we will advance collectively is to share such practices with one another. Here are a few additional examples.

- Given that we need organically interrelated language and culture programs, with language taught at all levels and with culture integrated into early language study, it makes sense to introduce a policy, as we did at Ohio State in the early 1990s and as we have now at Notre Dame, that all regular faculty members will teach at least one language course per year.
- At Ohio State one of the administrative assistants took German 101, eventually working her way up through the program. That made her feel much more a part of the department, and her developing skills enhanced our level of support.
- The flourishing Italian program at Notre Dame has every semester multiple versions of simple but effective black-and-white flyers, with a portrait that reads “X speaks (or spoke) Italian ... shouldn’t you?” The diversity of examples is impressive, ranging from Mozart to Clint Eastwood, and includes persons of special significance to Notre Dame undergraduates, such as Benedict XVI and Father Ted Hesburgh. Every semester new names appear.
- The moderator of the 2011 MLA panel at which I first gave this paper, Russell Berman of Stanford University, suggested during the discussion that we might think of ourselves as coaches, such that every language student has a personal coach. I like this idea for at least three reasons. First, as Russell noted, our faculty-student ratios in languages such as German permit us to engage students in this way. Second, the requirements for effective language learning have analogies in athletics: beyond guidance or coaching, language students need motivation, discipline, practice, and an intuitive sense of, or sensibility for, the activity. Here I’m thinking, for example, of the abilities to make educated guesses about meaning based on cognates, context, and the component parts of words and to intuit which words are more vital to learn than others. Third, the metaphor emphasizes the extent to which language learning must take place beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the semester.

III

Third, what strategies, along with best and worst practices, might be distinctive to German departments?

In reflecting on our crisis, we probably place too much emphasis on what is distinctive to German and not enough on generic college excellence or excellence for any foreign language and culture program. Most of our challenges are not unique. But as we turn to what is distinctive, what can one add?

First, some disciplines and topics are more important than others. German has a tremendous wealth of great literature and culture. Although I am a

strong supporter of German studies, especially for undergraduates, if we don't also teach the great authors of the German tradition, no one will. When taught effectively, great works still inspire and engage the imagination of students, attracting them to the major. Alas, if one looks at recent dissertation topics, the trend is overwhelmingly toward contemporary culture studies. That hardly speaks to one of the most compelling intellectual reasons for the study of German—because it gives students direct access to the tradition's great authors.²

Second, besides the impressive number of great literary figures are of course the remarkable German contributions to philosophy, intellectual history, and music. Courses that integrate the greatness of German culture are likely to attract students and command intellectual respect. The range of German thinkers offers meaningful connections to disciplines from aesthetics to sociology.

Third, German history is also distinctive. Its grossly aberrant path is arguably the greatest puzzle of twentieth-century history and has certainly led students to explore the German world. However, this is a negative distinction, and while the Nazi atrocities need to be integrated into our courses, students also need to develop a positive relationship to the German-speaking countries, or they will surely turn elsewhere over time.

Fourth, some departments have done wonders in collaborating with other disciplines, such as the distinctive linkage of German and engineering at the University of Rhode Island (Grandin). A collaboration of this kind is another avenue toward making a German program indispensable.

Fifth, a German department can make effective use of websites, such as those at Dartmouth College, San Diego State University, or Vistawide, which contain information that might help persuade students to enroll in, and continue with, German. Also useful in this context would be the American Association of Teachers of German "Took Kit for Advocacy"; no longer present on their website «<http://www.aatg.org>», it will apparently be reintroduced eventually by the Goethe Institut «<http://www.goethe.de/>», and the AATG will have a link to it.³

Without vision, a German program will suffer. An institution that has no concept of the idea of a university will not protect German if enrollments should fall below a minimum. A university that is animated by a compelling vision of an ideal university, in contrast, will not eliminate German, even when the program is adrift and enrollments are modest. Still, even at such a university a German department that has no vision for itself may survive, but it will hardly flourish.

Notes

¹ I try to make such a case in *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*

² During the discussion after my presentation, a member of the audience suggested that the movement away from a disciplinary focus on literary figures such as Lessing to contemporary culture studies is an innocuous change, simply different, as the times change. In *Why Literature Matters* I try to argue that this is not the case.

³ The reasons found on these websites will be less persuasive to a dean. Two of the most common and unconvincing arguments made on behalf of retaining or obtaining faculty positions are: so-and-so is leaving, and she must be replaced; or German is an important subject because, for example, it has the largest number of native speakers in the European Union. The first is to argue based not on merit but on past privilege. The second is to find oneself among other departments which can make no less compelling, if different, arguments on behalf of the contemporary relevance of their languages or disciplines.

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