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Truth and Consequences: French and the Profession

Russell Ganim

What is the future of literature in the French Studies of the 21st century? It depends on whom you ask. Assessment and survey data at our university indicate that students, who see a need for literature, would nonetheless prefer a more varied curriculum that centers on more "practical" use of the language. The University of Nebraska is but one example, of course, but in talking to colleagues across the profession, I have understood that what attracts students to French or any foreign language is its daily application to their lives—personally and professionally.

What about professors? Without question, faculty in French understand this response on the part of our students. We also recognize that curricular shifts are needed if the discipline is to remain stable and ultimately prosper. The problems inherent in meeting these new demands stem not only from the literary backgrounds of most university and college faculty, but from the lack of time, resources, and administrative support to reshape course offerings in French within a more global context.

To a large extent, French departments and programs already do what we can to modernize. The incorporation of Francophone literature and criticism from outside France into most curricula has put French in the forefront of post-colonial, transnational, and even eco-critical studies. Our study of France itself remains refreshingly complex: expanded offerings in translation studies, Beur literature, and contemporary

civilization make French more "relevant" to today's student clientele—whose focus on present-day media, communication and culture is more acute than it was two decades ago. Emphasis on the media, digitization, and other forms of technology underscores the immediate value of French. Study abroad—a standard in most programs—quite literally confronts the student with the relevance of French and Francophone studies.

Yet more emphasis needs to be placed on integrating French language and culture into career and lifelong learning experiences. Many students majoring in French carry a second specialization in a more "pragmatic" discipline such as advertising or finance, but if French is to fulfill its promise as a world language with global opportunities for our students, then new programs of study need to be developed in order to give students the capacity to learn and apply French in non-traditional ways. Indeed, these new programs are crucial to the survival of French at the university level. Faculty and administrators need to invest more time and resources into developing such initiatives. If they do, the payoff will be enormous. If not, the consequences will be disastrous and could mean the reduction, or even elimination, of some French programs.

In most cases, innovation should be offered at the graduate level. Given current time and financial constraints, most undergraduate programs are not in a position to do much more than to add a few courses that call attention to French and careers. Since professionalization begins at the graduate level for a large number of students, it is logical to think about these initiatives at the master's and even Ph.D. levels. Indeed, notable examples of such interdisciplinary programs exist: the CIBER (Center for International Business, Education, and Research) initiative at multiple universities in the U.S., the dual master's programs in French Studies and journalism, law, and business at New York University's Institute for French Studies, and the Professional French Masters Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The contributions of these programs are both academically and economically significant because

they create institutional mechanisms whereby French can be applied to new fields of inquiry and thereby attract new kinds of students. In many cases, programs like these have grown out of "French Studies" initiatives that build on interdisciplinary interests in different departments or colleges within the same university. While they do offer new courses, a key component of these programs is the inclusion of summer or semester internships that allow students to simulate their use of the language in career situations. The origins of these programs differ, but in many cases it works like this: faculty develop proposals for collaborative work, as part of a university plan to encourage cross-disciplinary activity, create high-profile "niche" programs, or internationalize studies across campus. The French government has played a role in this regard, having created the French-American Partner University Fund (PUF) to stimulate research and curricular ventures in institutions of higher learning both in France and the United States.

Upon graduation, a French major asks the proverbial question, "What can I do with this?" The answers usually fall among the following categories: (a) "teach English in France for a year," (b) "apply to a graduate program in literature then teach in a high school or university," or—the most disheartening of all—(c) "get French out of your system and study something more useful."

With more post-graduate options now available, it is likely that more students could be attracted to studying French at all levels. In terms of foreign-language study in the United States, enrollment trends indicate that French is still solidly in second place behind Spanish. France and French still hold a powerful allure for many American students, mainly because of France's history, its role in the creation of Western culture, and the relative ease English-speakers have in learning French (as opposed, say, to a Middle Eastern or Asian language). Still, other language programs are adapting in order to recruit and retain students. Despite its enormous advantage in numbers, Spanish is attempting to reach out to

heritage speakers and to develop courses that focus on Spanish in the U.S. as well as service learning and other community-based programs. Likewise, enrollments in Chinese and Japanese have grown dramatically in recent years. The career benefits of knowing these languages are clear enough; but enhanced opportunities for studying and teaching in East Asia have drawn higher numbers of students to these disciplines. Arabic's status as a competitor to French will only increase in the coming years.

Given their current composition, mission, and resources—especially in a climate of economic uncertainty and huge budget deficits—it is difficult for most college or university French programs to alter their curricula to add professionally-based courses to a significant extent, let alone build such programs themselves. Yet the emergence of these new academic and career opportunities is a welcome development, and traditional French literature programs should actively support them by encouraging students to apply for them, by bringing recruiters to campus, and by reformulating their advising strategy to include French for the professions when considering graduate school. Traditional literature programs will not suffer. On the contrary, the promotion of professional development in French at the graduate level will serve to draw more students into the fold, with the study of French literature benefiting as a result.

At the same time, not enough of these professionally-based programs exist, and their development needs to continue if French Studies are to have a future beyond the undergraduate level. Consider the benefits French enjoys. For instance, those who major or minor in French are usually highly motivated. The typical undergraduate profile of the French major or minor features a high GPA, a keen interest in diversity, and a desire to incorporate foreign language into the student's professional experience. After a semester abroad, most students of French make an effort to go back to the country where the experience took place, for an extended stay, soon after they graduate. A certain dedication to French

and to France is a chief characteristic of these students; as a result, they are highly receptive to opportunities that permit them to develop this lifelong relationship.

The relationship starts with a post-graduate experience, with France and French providing numerous opportunities. France is still very much a player on the global stage and its internal stability as well as its external reach make French a prime candidate for advanced study in a number of disciplines. As a major European power, France has the economic, social, and cultural infrastructure for internships and employment in fields like business, law, government, education, and the arts. France continually ranks as one of the most frequently visited countries in the world, and Paris holds special influence as a beacon of western civilization.

At the same time, France's extensive presence in the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Caribbean make the language and culture unique points of entry into the developing world. France's connection to "La Francophonie" is as strong as ever, meaning that unique opportunities exist to use French in parts of the world where the setting is even more multicultural than France itself. In other words, present-day French is appealing because it offers a good mix of the familiar and the exotic.

France is acting on this. In recent years, the French government has increased its outreach to American students through a variety of language exchange programs and other partnerships. The French seem willing to do even more, under the right circumstances. As a result, conditions are favorable to make a move and to create new—and in many cases better—opportunities for motivated young people to incorporate French into their careers. Not to take advantage of these opportunities would do a disservice to our students. It would also deprive our profession of the growth and novelty it needs in order to survive.

Those faculty and administrators who do not understand this must remember that, in fact, the humanities deliver a lot of bang for the

buck. When compared to the hard sciences, outlays required for projects in the humanities are relatively low. Similarly, given that competition for status is not as fierce in the humanities as it is in other disciplines, a university can more readily distinguish itself through innovation in this realm. One high profile program, if properly structured and promoted, can serve as a selling point for a particular department or College of Arts and Sciences. The humanities especially feel the need to go beyond the "learning for learning's sake argument" to justify their programs. Consequently, the ability to develop initiatives that stress the practical application of foreign language or international education becomes essential.

Many would contend that in times of a budget crisis, resources need to be allocated *away* from the humanities and into more "visible" areas. The counter argument is stronger: there is just as much, if not more, visibility in the humanities as there is in other academic fields. In foreign language, this impact comes from high enrollments due to: (a) distribution requirements, (b) the popularity of an increasingly global culture, or (c) both of these factors. Such large applicant pools allow for a more rigorous selection of graduate students for specialized programs.

What could departments do? Since many of the professional programs in French are housed on campuses with large undergraduate populations, a feeder system is already in place. Luckily, only one additional faculty or adjunct faculty hire is typically needed to assume administrative and academic responsibilities. If such a hire is not possible, part of an existing faculty member's workload could be reassigned to accommodate the needs of the program. The goal, of course, is for these initiatives to be self-sustaining, to the point where they could break even or eventually turn a profit. In the latter case, the program could be granted a budgetary status autonomous from its home department's, and its own revenues could be reinvested to ensure growth.

Whether or not academic institutions believe this is a worthwhile field into which to direct resources, the need for experts in foreign language and culture will continue to grow. While English remains the world's *lingua franca*, there is no doubt that—especially for Americans—the ability to communicate with international populations in their own language and speak with them about their own culture yields all sorts of economic and social advantages. As we have seen, French provides a superb balance between the established and the emerging world. The human, educational, and financial capital is there; we simply need to make the decision to mobilize it for this purpose. If we do, the benefits will far outweigh the costs, and we will also have enriched those we have charged to improve this world we have made for them.