At the Crossroads: Learning to Speak the (Foreign) Language of Higher Education Leadership

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Introduction

MORE than ten years have passed since the 2007 MLA Ad Hoc Committee of Foreign Languages report recommended structural and curricular change initiatives to counteract the growing crisis in postsecondary world language education. Almost a decade earlier, Heidi Byrnes had already expounded on the need to replace persistent bifurcated curricular legacy systems in world language education with clearly articulated programs across the entire undergraduate spectrum. To do so, she argued, faculty members at all levels needed to abandon unrealistic and nativist expectations of student proficiency, stop pitting teaching against research, and replace the dictates of a textbook or chosen methodology with well-thought-out curricula. She also urged practitioners to engage in "deep reflection on the value of foreign language study in a collegiate context" to help "learners perform the humanist act of discovering themselves" through the acquisition of multiple literacies (278). If we consider John Kotter's change theory (1993), world language practitioners have been aware of a sense of urgency to devise and enact change since the 1990s; however, attempts at building a guiding coalition or forming a strategic vision and initiatives have—with few notable exceptions—rarely been enacted or yielded many tangible results at the department level.

Resistance to much-needed changes in our discipline is certainly not baseless given the pronounced vulnerabilities language programs face in the light of dwindling resources and declining enrollments, reductions or elimination of language admission or graduation requirements, and the scarcity of employment opportunities for world language practitioners in higher education, compounded by a heavy reliance on contingent faculty. Further, shifting demographics and ever-greater diversity in higher education frequently result in traditional world language programs having little appeal to a linguistically and culturally diverse student body because few "departmental offerings match [students'] language learning profile and are relevant to their interests" (Byrnes 282). On the contrary, it appears that most practices in place today lend further support to the critics of world language education who maintain that language learning is nothing but an arduous and elitist undertaking that yields little return for either the language learner or the world languages department in terms of investment of time, energy, and money. While the authors of this paper understand that many factors contribute to student enrollment in world languages, we view the fact that enrollments continue to decline nationwide as at least partial evidence that most world language units have maintained bifurcated instructional and curricular systems, have failed to engage faculty in much-needed change initiatives,

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and have done little to counteract what Benjamin Rifkin has called a systemic "marginalization of world language instruction" (54). Such vulnerabilities are aggravated by the neoliberal paradigm of the contemporary postsecondary enterprise, in which the study of languages other than English is perceived as a luxury lacking practicality while STEM education is considered essential for social mobility upon graduation. Any department chair knows that declining enrollments ultimately translate to budget cuts, reduction or nonrenewal of faculty lines, and the possible elimination of entire programs.

While many in academia around the United States may anchor themselves in cynical opposition to the proliferation of neoliberal discourse and the policies that accompany it, we propose that language departments are in a uniquely privileged position within the humanities to assert the value of our programs within the neoliberal paradigm. However, it is imperative that we learn to speak the "foreign" language of upper administration to defend the utility of what we do vis-à-vis skeptical presidents, vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, deans, associate deans, and other higher education leaders. In other words, where Charlotte Melin maintained that world language practitioners and administrators must learn to speak the language of the humanities better to frame our discipline in the context of a liberal arts education, we aim to shift that argument to communicating the value of world language education to an audience consisting of members of college and university leadership.

Despite the fact that many of our colleagues and scholars across the nation have long been debating ways of navigating the complexities of K–16 language education, the authors of *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the Twenty-First Century*, a recent report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, may well have felt compelled to address many of the same core issues expressed in the MLA report a decade earlier. The discourse and verbiage may have shifted from a discussion of *foreign* to that of *world* (and most recently to *America's*) languages and now includes a greater focus on heritage and indigenous tongues while attending to the needs of learners beyond graduation. However, the broader question about the overall utility of languages remains at the heart of the matter—a deliberate reference to the 2013 American Academy of Arts and Sciences report of the same title. In making a case for the humanities in general by examining their role in supporting civic engagement, democracy, and national security, as well as social efficiency and employability of those with a liberal arts education, the report also stressed language education as one of its three main goals.

In addition to the 2017 American Academy of Arts and Sciences report—notably the result of a bipartisan Congressional commission called to examine the status of language learning and instruction in the United States—there are many ongoing initiatives that draw attention to the personal and societal impact of language learning, promote political and economic support for language programs across the K–16 continuum, and even attempt to devise joint strategies and a shared vision for the future of language education in the United States. These efforts have aimed to break down isolation between university programs and create greater continuity between K–12 and postsecondary language programs. Some initiatives include the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language's recently launched campaign Lead

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with Languages (leadwithlanguages.org), the ADFL-MLA Language Consultancy Service for departments at universities and community colleges, and a survey of K–12 world language enrollment published by the American Councils for International Education (americancouncils.org/FLEREPORT). Through federal funding, two programs emphasize the importance of a linguistic and culturally competent populace with a focus on national intelligence and security: the National Foreign Language Center's STARTALK initiative (startalk.umd.edu), overseen by the National Security Agency, and the Language Flagship program, part of the National Security Education Program in the Department of Defense. In the Department of Education, Title VI grants, administered through the International and Foreign Language Education component of the Office of Secondary Education, support languages through National Foreign Language Resource Centers, Centers for International Business Education and Research, and National Resource Centers. Title VI also funds various scholarships and fellowships like Foreign Language and Area Studies and Fulbright-Hays, along with program-building opportunities like the Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Languages competition. Other organizations such as the JNCL-NCLIS (languagepolicy.org) and the Coalition for International Education (usglobalcompetence.org) advocate for language programs among policymakers in Washington, DC. Lastly, the proliferation of states that have passed a Seal of Biliteracy (sealofbiliteracy.org) indicates a desire to recognize students who have attained benchmark proficiency in more than one language and to promote multilingualism for its social, cultural, political, and economic benefits.

In the light of these developments, the goal of this article is not to debate the many reasons world language teaching and learning is losing ground in twenty-first-century higher education.[1] Instead, we wish to emphasize that neoliberal pressures in higher education and the institutional responses they engender have become a universal new reality whose ideological underpinnings are now firmly entrenched in the enterprise of academia. In essence, we aim to shift the discourse away from perpetuating a deficit analysis and offer both strategies and solutions on how to leverage these new realities to the benefit of world language teaching and learning. We argue that postsecondary world language leaders must learn to adapt to the neoliberal paradigm—or risk further diminishing the stature of our field.

A New Reality

Although little may have changed concerning structures and mind-sets among postsecondary world language practitioners over the past two decades, what has changed are two crucial aspects of the broader institutional context at colleges and universities across the country in which any initiatives are embedded. First, internationalization of virtually every aspect of campus life is now ubiquitous across higher education in the Western world and particularly in the United States. Internationalization initiatives include not only study abroad programs but also international faculty exchanges and research collaborations, an increased number of international students at universities in the United States, and subsequent changes to programmatic and curricular offerings (Bidyuk; Brandenburg and de Wit; Killick; Lumby

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and Foskett; Rumbley et al.). Although a 2001 study by the American Council on Education found that research institutions with highly active internationalization programs emphasized, at least conceptually, world language learning, such offerings still constituted one of the "strategies least likely to be used" by these universities (Green 18). At the same time, most internationalization efforts seem to follow an English-only approach in expanding programs and partnerships to countries or universities abroad and offering students an international experience without the hurdle of language learning. While such efforts may contribute to an institution's internationalization, per se, by connecting faculty members and students with universities abroad, they also unwittingly perpetuate a neocolonial approach to intercultural learning by engaging the other through the comforts of English and the exclusion of languages (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson). Such nativist English-only approaches adhere to neoliberal logic in that they constitute the most efficient means to satisfy the constant need to expand international efforts in ways that are quantifiable and therefore easy to include in data-driven metrics.

Second, market-driven forces of a neoliberal agenda now command virtually all aspects and strata of institutions of higher learning. While "new managerialism" in tertiary education is not a recent development (Deem), it has led to greater reliance on external funding (Levin) and the expectation that academic activities generate not only educational outcomes but also revenue (McRae). These in turn have resulted in the establishment of for-profit continuing education offerings (for instance, course offerings in English for nonnative speakers as well as a surge in online classes), increased revenue through residence halls and sports advertising contracts, and aggressive recruiting of international students who are expected to pay full tuition. Neoliberal pressures have further compelled some institutions to engage in the risky business of establishing branch campuses abroad (Heyl and Tullbane). As Lawrence Busch pointedly summarized, these strategies have shifted the financial burden of education from the state to students, reconceptualized higher education as a vehicle for graduates to land a high-paying job, transformed scholarly research into an arena for increased competition, firmly established national and global competitive ranking systems among universities in hopes of increased funding and prestige, and increased the number, power, and salaries of administrators. As a result, "market-like changes have transformed the self-understanding and consequent behavior of students, scholars, and administrators" who now view education as a competitive, for-profit enterprise (xvii). Among today's priorities for arguably all college executives are tuition revenue linked to credit-hour generation; graduation rates and job placement of students; external funding through fund-raising, grants, alumni giving, and private as well as corporate sponsorships; and institutional prestige through college rankings.

Along with an entrepreneurial mind-set, terminologies and concepts previously associated exclusively with the business world have entered the vocabulary of higher education leaders. Terms such as *return on investment*, *incentivizing faculty*, *value-added*, *stakeholders*, *reallocation of resources*, *responsibility centered management*, and *data-driven decision making* have become firmly entrenched in the newspeak of university leadership. Although we may find this language foreign, it is the very ideology behind the discourse that now frames our professional reality. Because

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neoliberalism in higher education must be understood as an inescapable fact, any strategies, initiatives, collaborations, and programs that language departments and faculty members propose should be conceived within the neoliberal context and articulated in the lingo spoken and understood by the upper administration.

Students' Needs First

Many in academia, and especially in the humanities, may consider such a thought a borderline blasphemous attempt to appease the higher powers on campus. However, we would like to reiterate that if we want our programs to be appreciated by our institutional leadership, we, in turn, must communicate their value in a vernacular that will be understood by our leaders. To this end, we may find common ground by centering our arguments on the needs of students as burgeoning global citizens. Allowing for variations among individual learners' needs, their socioeconomic situation, and the specific institutional context of our respective colleges and universities, we argue that being a member of a twenty-first-century workforce requires universal global skills that are independent of the unique circumstances of our language learners. The National Education Association lists several competences crucial to being an informed and prepared participant in a global society. Among these are international awareness, or "knowledge and understanding of world history, socioeconomic and political systems, and other global events," including "that local and national events can have international implications"; appreciation of cultural diversity, or the "ability to know, understand, and appreciate people from other cultures along with the capacity to acknowledge other points of view about pressing world issues," as well as the willingness to accept said differences in the interest of "productive and respectful cross-cultural relations"; proficiency in world languages; and competitve skills manifest in the ability to apply "extensive knowledge of international issues" through "high-level thinking skills that enhance creativity and innovation" (*Global Competence* 1).

The challenge faced by language departments is overcoming the perception that serving the needs of students is inevitably at odds with maintaining academic rigor, supporting faculty research interests, and maintaining crucial institutional support from the upper administration. The difficulty here is that these stakeholders' interests and priorities are frequently perceived to conflict with each other.[2] Concurrently, cynical attitudes on the part of faculty members—justified though they may be—engender distrust of top administrators because their interests are viewed as undermining the purity of academic inquiry and the integrity of intellectual curiosity.

The prevailing "provider-customer-producer terminology" of business not only typifies a modus operandi of educational neoliberalism but also constitutes the linguistic paradigm best understood by deans, provosts, and presidents (Byrnes 266). Such language seemingly embodies Orwellian doublespeak and invites our scorn, cynicism, and even ridicule. Ironically, we as language educators are in a privileged position to embrace and adopt new vocabulary, decipher linguistic structures, assimilate related connotative concepts, and turn these to our advantage. Still, many of us seem uncomfortable communicating with members of the upper administration in their own terms. Too often we do not—or perhaps are unwilling to—use the same

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linguistic skills we impart on our students to understand what our leaders expect of faculty and academic units, what they value, and what their vision is for the university or college. This understanding, however, would help individual departments align themselves better with that vision in a way that is both strategic and in keeping with the unit's academic mission. Too often, primary departmental objectives shun curricular innovation in the interest of maintaining disciplinary integrity, remaining faithful to our respective field of inquiry, and meeting increasingly stringent demands for research and publication (Morris and Laipple). However, we maintain that the notion of universities as consumer-driven marketplaces as well as spaces of high-level critical intellectual engagement is not a zero-sum concept. We argue that it is possible to reconcile the entrepreneurial demands with academic excellence and continue to serve our students' needs.

Change Strategies

In response to the pervasive neoliberal mind-set of our top academic administrators, we would like to propose several strategies that aim to both cater to our leaders' expectations and address student needs without sacrificing the integrity of faculty research and teaching. At the same time, these strategies aim to elevate the visibility and assert the relevance of language departments and their faculty members.

First, we challenge our colleagues to consider marketing their programs differently by incorporating terminology that communicates the broader impact of our field; this includes changing the name of the department if and where applicable. Using words such as *global*, *world*, *culture*, *society*, or *applied* in lieu of *foreign*, *literature*, or *classical* constitutes a de facto rebranding strategy that not only adopts that language of upper administration keen on internationalizing their campus but also affects the perception of language units among students and potential community partners by asserting the relevance of the faculty research and teaching to contemporary, real-world issues. The main objectives here should be to reflect collectively on our unit's shared vision in a way that refocuses and refines the mission of the department strategically within the neoliberal context of our universities; to communicate our identity, perceived value, and "brand" to external constituents (administrators, students, and community partners); and to ensure that this identity permeates the collaborations, programs, curricula, and pedagogy of the department.

By setting aside time for both formal retreats and informal planning sessions aimed at incorporating backward design to inform our collective thinking and actions, all members of the department (both faculty and staff) can assert agency to forge a shared horizon toward which they should be moving. Concurrently, they can conserve time and energy by minimizing wasted motion and avoiding actions and initiatives that do not align directly with the express mission of the department. In an era of diminished resources, increased expectations, and redirected funds, it is in every department's best interest to define its purpose clearly so that any labor or capital expended contributes directly to the goals and objectives of the unit.

Second, given these resource constraints, there are both practical and ideological reasons to seek out strategic partnerships with academic and nonacademic units

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within and outside our institutions. Collaborations not only with the social sciences and humanities but also with natural sciences, units in other colleges (e.g., international business, economics, public health, hospitality, criminal justice), and public and private enterprises may lead to attractive study abroad offerings, unique public speaking opportunities, and other extracurricular events, transdisciplinary research projects and grants, curricular innovation, program development, and more. Connections with nonacademic offices inside our institutions such as international initiatives, housing, the bookstore, career services, student services, and advising offer unique means to gain access to students who are not yet in our classes. Also, the offices of alumni outreach and development are vital in assisting departments to identify potential allies willing to contribute to their mission by, for instance, serving on departmental advisory boards. Community partners may include binational chambers of commerce as well as private industries, government agencies (primarily state-level world language supervisors), nonprofit organizations, and K–12 school districts, among others. Through collaborations with stakeholders in the community, departments may be able to develop internship programs that incentivize students to pursue languages. Such alliances further underscore the value of acquiring language competence to university leaders and assert the real-world impact of our discipline.

For any of these collaborations to be effective and actionable, we propose that departments consider five questions that deliberately utilize the neoliberal taxonomy:

1. What are our strategic goals and desired outcomes?
2. Who are the stakeholders and allies who can help us achieve those results?
3. Who (or what) are obstacles that force us to make deliberate decisions about our priorities?
4. What are our unit's internal assets to leverage and liabilities to mediate?
5. What quantifiable short-, mid-, and long-term actions can we take?

Concerning the first three questions, Iris Berdrow, in her study of the competencies, challenges, and expectations of department chairs in higher education, labeled these deliberate, time-consuming, but vital antecedents to action stakeholder mapping—that is, a systematic, critical, and honest reflection on who has the power to support or derail initiatives. Ascertaining assets and liabilities requires that all key members of the department engage in a concerted effort to frame their understanding of human capital, curricular content, departmental legacy structures, and faculty expertise and personal or professional connections in neoliberal terms. The final item—taking specific action—directly speaks to both the need for members of the upper administrative strata to be made aware of quantifiable institutional gains our activities can generate and the symbolic impact of our playing their game and speaking a common language. What we advocate is not supplanting anecdotal support for the value of world language programs with purely quantitative metrics. Personal stories of how learning a language affects students' lives remain potent tools that ground and humanize the educational experience we provide. But these stories must be compelling, and they must unequivocally support institutional strategic priorities such as development, alumni outreach, and student recruitment.

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Lastly, along with the notion of departmental outreach and collaborations within and outside our colleges and universities, we urge departmental leaders to leverage their institution's internationalization activities. Because we can assume that virtually all postsecondary institutions have internationalization in some form as a strategic focus, curricular changes and collaborations that reinforce this priority can greatly benefit our discipline. Every world language department's greatest asset is the ability to teach actionable intercultural competence through cross-disciplinary real-life curricular content. However, successful implementation of a well-articulated strategic vision requires a concerted effort by all departmental administrative leaders (chairs, associate chairs, directors of undergraduate and graduate studies, etc.) and buy-in among key members of the department without whom any sustainable initiatives are bound to fail. Chairs cannot do this alone and need their faculty members to support the mission, forge alliances, and connect to partners inside and outside the organization through mutually beneficial relationships (see Gordon and Jack; Secundo et al.).

Conclusion

We have argued throughout this article that world language leaders at all levels must learn to speak the "foreign" language of neoliberalism that is now solidly embedded in upper postsecondary administration. Although many of us are understandably loath to adopt the vocabulary of business and entrepreneurship, we maintain that twenty-first-century institutional realities compel us to overcome these trepidations. Along with knowing how to communicate our departments' purpose concisely and generate outcomes in ways university leadership will appreciate, world language leaders must consider the broader institutional and community context. Not only does this enable us to forge symbiotic partnerships, but it also provides vital information concerning the needs and expectations of our stakeholders. By knowing what our students and other strategic partners value, we can embrace backward design and strategic planning to reshape our curriculum, focus on clear and consistent articulation, set outcome goals, and forge a common purpose. Creating a community with a common language rooted in the entrepreneurial paradigm empowers us not necessarily to undermine the monolith of neoliberalism but instead to turn it to our advantage.

Like it or not, in today's educational landscape the question of whether our students are our "customers" has long been settled in the affirmative (Bay and Daniel; Mark; Schwartzman). We already are part of an "enterprise," namely that of teaching and supporting our students' intellectual and personal growth not just for career readiness but also for navigating the complexities of a globalized world. Through language teaching, we have the power to endow our students with empathy for diversity and provide them with tools to become conscientious global citizens. This should be our north star and guide all our decisions. But first, we must embrace the language of higher education leadership. Only then will we be able to reassert the relevance of our discipline in an ever-changing world and rebuild a foundation that allows us to shape the education of today's generation and those yet to come.

Notes

1. Detrimental factors such as resistance to change among faculty and staff members, diminished financial and human-capital resources, disciplinary silos, and curricular bifurcation (Byrnes; Maxim et al.), as well as a deficit mind-set even among some educators who believe that American students are "somehow culturally impaired and predisposed to resist second language acquisition" are well established in the literature (Berman 25).

2. For an in-depth analysis of department chairs' often competing pressures, see Berdrow; Hecht et al.

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