

The Dynamics of Language Program Direction

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Introduction: The Dynamics of Successful Leadership in Foreign Language Programs

In the United States few academic disciplines exist in which junior practitioners are asked to assume responsibility for the future directions of particular programs, perhaps even entire professions. Foreign language programs are notable exceptions. New holders of the doctorate, many with backgrounds in a literary field, are often asked by the hiring or employing department to assume responsibility for its language programs. In most instances the sole justifications for such appointments are the new colleagues' young age and the immediacy of their experience (they were themselves TAs until recently). In all such situations, the dynamics of leadership in program direction is critical.

According to Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* (1981: p. 352), dynamics "deals with forces and their relation primarily to the motion but sometimes also to the equilibrium of bodies." Thus the focus of the field is "the pattern of change or growth of an object or phenomenon." The open title of the present volume, the fourth in the AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction series, deliberately conveys the notion that successful language program directors must simultaneously manage and effectively change their programs in a manner that educates both students and practitioners. Substantive change, which is at the core of all successful programs, comes about through that interaction of evolution and leadership we in the field call language program direction.

Wilga M. Rivers argues convincingly for rethinking the nature of language program direction: we must develop a slow but steady approach to change rather than lament the absence of immediate acceptance. Meaningful change begins, she asserts, with vocabulary: "The vocabulary

we use about our work is important psychologically, and sets the tone for discussion of future development of the teaching of the language. We must consider ourselves as being *charged with a language program*, of which elementary and intermediate courses are but one part—an important part, certainly, but not the whole. Then we must work to see that the entire language program through to the advanced level develops some coherence, diversity, and relevance in terms of present student and institutional needs.”

Recognizing the need for change in the profession, especially in the way we prepare the professoriate of the future, is also central to other contributions in this volume. Cathy Pons decries the current model of TA education, that is, reliance on a workshop and a methods course that focus primarily on preparing the TA to teach an institution’s elementary courses. She envisions a multitiered model, one that demands an increase in scope and commitment.

Katherine Arens suggests a new context and rationale for TA education, one that would enable TAs to exercise some degree of control over their own professional development. She also notes that “the dynamics of language program direction must be expanded to include total professional preparation,” not just learning how to teach basic courses.

The results of a systematic survey of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* over a five-year period are the foundation of Francis Lide’s call for change. He argues that managing professional visibility should be a much greater aspect of the future professoriate’s education. Whether future faculty members will have “gratifying careers . . . will depend not only on the quality of their teaching and the productivity of their research, but on the . . . public awareness of that field as worthy of support, and the esteem in which they and the subject they profess are held by society at large and especially by faculty in other disciplines. In short, their career success will depend on the dynamics of the factors that contribute—or fail to contribute—to their visibility.”

Lynn Carbón Gorell and Jorge Cubillos take a close look at the orientation courses (preservice workshops) for new teaching assistants at many institutions. Results of a survey conducted by the authors indicate that such programs generally have an “institutionally-specific” mission, that is, they prepare TAs to perform specific teaching tasks for the institution rather than impart to the future professors the theoretical foundations of their chosen discipline and its teaching practices.

Aspiring textbook authors (frequently synonymous with language program directors) should benefit from the latest research interests of L. Kathy

Heilenman and Erwin Tschirner. They note correctly at the outset of their chapter that “the role of foreign language program directors (FLPDs) in the development and publication of materials and textbooks” is seldom discussed in the professional literature. They set out “to examine the context within which foreign language textbooks . . . are produced. Who writes these textbooks? What motivates their authors? Who actually produces the ancillary material (for example, workbooks, computer-assisted instruction[CAI], video, and the like) that accompanies textbooks? How have authors fared from both a professional and a financial point of view? And finally, what kinds of relationships have they established with educational publishers?” Their answers, although preliminary in many respects, are nevertheless quite revealing.

Diane W. Birckbichler, Kathryn A. Corl, and Craig Deville discuss the importance of accuracy in placement for incoming students in the context of the computer-adaptive placement examination used at Ohio State University (OSU). The examination, they assert, has demonstrated its usefulness. It allows information to be collected and analyzed efficiently and preserves that information in a database both for secondary language programs that send students to Ohio State and for the OSU language programs into which incoming students place.

In another of their series of recent essays on disadvantaged learners, Richard L. Sparks and Lenore Ganschow advocate increasing the responsibilities of foreign language program directors. In this instance, directors should also teach their TAs how to recognize and to aid the “at-risk” foreign language learner. Sparks and Ganschow outline a four-step diagnostic process to screen students with foreign language learning problems, and they note some ways the foreign language curriculum might be modified to accommodate these students.

On the other hand, addressing the ever-increasing work load of language program directors, Richard L. Davis and Joan F. Turner have devised a development program for peer supervisors. Utilizing lectures, videotape viewing, role playing, computer tutorials, and discussion, the program prepares individuals to assume supervisory duties, thus enabling program directors to attend to the interminable (mini)crises that seem to occur daily in language programs. Davis and Turner stress “models of supervision, planning the classroom visit, use of a classroom observation instrument and its relationship to effective foreign language teaching, debriefing procedures, and remediation strategies.”

Peer supervision is also the subject of the chapter by James F. Lee,

Donna Deans Binkowski, and Alex Binkowski. They claim that through direct experience “peer supervision offers the department its best opportunity for preparing a future professoriate.” The chapter explores three perspectives (the department’s, plus one negative and one positive TA experience) concerning the TAs who supervise TAs.

Change in program direction, teaching method, or the way “things have always been done” is at the core of the chapter by Flore Zéphir and Marie-Magdeleine Chirol. They report reactions to their efforts to make exclusive use of the target language in the program for which they share responsibility. The possible success of their changes rested on taking into account the reactions both of TAs and students.

The desired result of dynamism in language program direction is productive change, the sort that improves the education of the professoriate of the future while tending to the needs of the students enrolled in today’s language programs. All of the contributions in this volume provoke thought to that end.

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