

# **What a French Teacher Needs to Know to Work Effectively with Guidance Counselors**

**Jim Malone\***

Guidance Counselor and Consultant

It might come as a surprise to many that there used to be a common requirement for all school counselors to have had previous classroom teaching experience as part of their guidance certification. This pre-requisite made sense to the degree that it ensured an understanding of and empathy for the teacher's role and related classroom dynamics. On the other hand, excluding an entire group of potentially talented individuals without teaching experience from serving students as counselors seemed neither fair nor practical. At the core of this issue is the challenge of professional empathy: How can teachers and counselors understand and appreciate their respective roles? How might they work together for the common good of the students they serve?

In addressing these issues, I bring my experiences as a teacher of German, Latin and Spanish for five years before becoming a school counselor some 35 years ago. In my current work with my wife, Connie, the Director of the Carole Fredericks Foundation, I have been sharing my insights and experiences to help French teachers understand how they might partner and work with counselors to encourage and promote the study of French.

## **Counseling at the Crossroads**

Teachers certainly perceive counselors as exerting significant influence over the decisions that students make during the course selection process as they progress through high school. School counselors could be described as standing at the crossroads of student career planning and educational credentialing. It is important, however, that the entire faculty realize that counselors work towards balancing a number of demands and competing objectives when dealing with their students. Second language teachers, and French teachers in particular, certainly have every right to advocate for their courses and programs. They are frequently supported in these efforts by students and their parents. While counselors should have empathy for what foreign language teachers are trying to accomplish, they also need to ensure that the students' best interests, short term and long term, are well served. The same may be said regarding career services counselors and academic advisors on the college or university levels.

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Motivated and highly achieving high school juniors and seniors usually find themselves sorting through a mix of required and elective courses that relate to their projected college majors and potential career paths. Given the finite number of periods in the school day and the realities of possible “singleton” advanced level courses, it is not uncommon that an AP language course will fall prey to either a master schedule “conflict” or a competing advanced course in music, art, the humanities, math, or science, which may relate directly to a student’s preferred college major. For example, consider for a moment the situation of a student who is passionate about art and is planning on fine arts as a college major. This individual may face a course selection choice between French AP (or another advanced French course) and an art portfolio preparation course during senior year.

In this milieu of competing courses and influences, what helpful information can the teacher offer the counseling staff? How can this information integrate the best intersection of students’ interests and the French teachers’ interest in providing a long sequence of French studies and even sustaining a French program when program and course cuts may be the result of fewer students in courses, especially at the upper levels? In some cases, French teachers may simply have to step back and look at the bigger picture involving the student and then move beyond their own vested interest and personal commitment to French. This position is a very difficult one, however, because most second language teachers are passionate about the importance of their language. They are very aware of the important benefits students realize from pursuing language through advanced levels.

### **Advanced Language Study Benefits**

The 2008 ACTFL Student Survey Report indicates that the vast majority of students study second language based on extrinsic or instrumental motivational factors, namely to fulfill high school graduation and college entrance requirements. (Please see

[http://www.actfl.org/files/public/ACTFL\\_Final\\_2008\\_completeLOW.pdf](http://www.actfl.org/files/public/ACTFL_Final_2008_completeLOW.pdf).)

In many cases students do not realize that simply satisfying minimal graduation requirements for second language puts them at a disadvantage in the college admissions process, especially in the case of very competitive colleges.

However, encouraging American students to commit themselves to advanced levels of study and achieving a degree of fluency in a second language has been an uphill battle due to the many culturally related reasons that are all too clear to us as educators. We all strive to help students appreciate how the study of second language enhances cultural and political intelligence. We know that mastering a second language also expands intellectual development and enriches learning across the curriculum. These benefits fall under the rubric of intrinsic motivation.

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We also need to convince students that mastery of a second language can add to their career toolkit and expand employment opportunities, advantages that fall under the rubric extrinsic motivation.

## Activities to Explore the Benefits of French Study

The following strategies and activities address, in particular, how the study of French language may benefit students. They can be helpful as French teachers relate with counselors and other individuals who will influence the choices that students have to make in regard to advanced language study.

- **Regular collaborative contact with school counselors:**  
It is a wonderful strategy to invite each member of the counseling department to serve as a liaison to specific academic departments within the school. Seek out a counselor who might have an interest in your second language department and who is willing to attend some of your department meetings a few times during the year. This presence is especially helpful around the time when courses and master schedules are being determined for the next school year.
- **Counselor class visits:**  
Ask counselors to visit your classes occasionally to see what goes on so they can appreciate the creativity and energy that go into learning French.
- **Co-presentations on benefits of language study:**  
Team up with your school counselor to make a presentation that demonstrates how French can add to a student's career toolkit. Several of the websites below provide meaningful resources, and the AATF has several brochures that promote all of the solid reasons how and why French can add to the student's career toolkit.
- **College French study combinations:**  
Show your students an actual "plan of study" on the college level that illustrates either a French major or how French may be combined with a variety of other majors (see Indiana University-Bloomington website listed below).
- **College student presentations on French study:**  
Call a local college/university French department and invite a student, who is studying French as a meaningful component of career preparation, to speak to your classes.
- **Professional French-user presentations:**  
Invite an adult, who has used French as an integral part of career preparation and job performance, to speak to your classes about how this linguistic advantage has paid off.
- **HR professional presentations:**  
Invite a Human Resources professional who can address the advantages of French language competency during the job search.
- **Parent education on French benefits:**

Educate parents via “Meet the Teacher” night, newsletters and career information explaining how French language competency enhances employment opportunities.

- Testimonials and stories:  
Use narratives and testimonials about individuals who have found their life’s passion or career because of their proficiency in French. The “Carole Fredericks story” (See <http://www.cdfmusiclegacy.com/artist/bio.html>) is an example of the value of determination, persistence, and following a dream. What might appear to be “good luck” is actually the outcome of responsible planning and using talents to the fullest degree. Share Louis Pasteur’s remark that “Chance favors the prepared mind.”

### **Reasons to Study French and the Opportunities French Provides**

In order to be prepared to talk about the benefits of study – particularly continued and advanced study – of French, teachers should prepare themselves by becoming acquainted with sources of information that they can use. The following web sites are particularly helpful and are recommended:

<http://www.fll.vt.edu/French/whyfrench.html>

[http://www.actfl.org/files/public/ACTFL\\_Final\\_2008\\_completeLOW.pdf](http://www.actfl.org/files/public/ACTFL_Final_2008_completeLOW.pdf)

<http://web.wm.edu/odlang/french/careers.php?svr=www#veronica>

<http://www.indiana.edu/~frithome/undergrads/why-french.shtml>

<http://www.utm.edu/staff/globeg/profren.shtml>

<http://www.utm.edu/departments/french/french.html>

[http://french.about.com/od/whylearnfrench/Why\\_learn\\_French.htm](http://french.about.com/od/whylearnfrench/Why_learn_French.htm)

<http://french.about.com/library/weekly/aa120800.htm>

[http://www.saskschools.ca/curr\\_content/pdcfrench/whycorefrench.html](http://www.saskschools.ca/curr_content/pdcfrench/whycorefrench.html)

<http://www.learn-languages-abroad.co.uk/learn-french-language.html>

<http://www.monster.com/>

<http://www.careerbuilder.com>

<http://www.multilingualvacancies.com/vacancies/french-language-jobs.php>

### **Conclusion**

In short, it is by working together that counselors and French teachers can best help students and maintain strong French programs. It is important for French teachers to understand the constraints under which counselors are working as they help students to plan a desirable schedule of classes. At the same time, teachers can also help counselors to understand their French programs better. In particular, they can highlight the career benefits to be acquired by studying French as well as the advantages that students will accrue toward college entrance when they complete a long sequence of language study. By collaborating with counselors in

these kinds of positive ways, French teachers can create allies and advocates for their programs.

*\* Dr. Jim Malone is an experienced teacher, counselor and counselor educator. He has worked with high school students and their families for 40 years. He currently co-presents at teacher workshops with his wife, Connie Fredericks-Malone, who is the Director of CDF Music Legacy and the Carole D. Fredericks Foundation*