

# Advocacy for College/University French Programs

Randa J. Duvick  
Valparaiso University

Just as French programs in elementary, middle, and high schools can come under threat, college and university programs can also be menaced with reduction or elimination. Given the financial pressures that universities increasingly face, this issue has accelerated, and more and more French programs find that they are vulnerable. The tactics that advocates can use in the two cases—K-12 and college/university—have certain similarities, but there are enough differences that it is worth a separate discussion of the strategies that can be used by those advocating for the preservation of college or university programs.

The American post-secondary educational system is perhaps even more varied than the K-12 system, with institutions that are private or public, religiously affiliated or not, ranging from under 500 students to over 40,000, from strictly undergraduate to those hosting doctoral programs, from those aimed at liberal arts to those focusing on pre-professional programs, and on and on. Each institution's governance structure is unique as well, with different levels of department or program autonomy, public accountability, and administration involvement in program development and maintenance.

Thus it is important that those advocating for French programs be aware of their particular institutional practices and structures and that they tailor their advocacy efforts accordingly. Beyond those differing institutional situations, however, certain strategies can apply broadly to many programs.

## Best Practices

First is what we might call “French program best practices”: ways in which French programs can remain vibrant, visible, and forward-looking. These are strategies that fit into the “promotion” paradigm that is advocated for teachers of French in K-12 schools, and aim at keeping programs from becoming vulnerable in the first place. Since conversations about program reduction or elimination often begin by talking about the number of French majors being served, these best practices can help to keep the number of majors elevated by giving the program a high profile and making it attractive to students while still rigorous.

- 1) Programs, including curriculum, study-abroad options, and co-curricular offerings, need to be seen as responding to student needs and desires. Today, that often involves a curriculum that offers more than just French literature courses at the advanced level, including business language, meaningful courses exploring culture and civilization, and significant exposure to Francophone literatures and cultures. (Program planners may wish to refer to the 2007 Report from the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages [available at <http://www.mla.org/flreport>] to see the ways in which the conversation about broadening the curriculum is taking place on the national level. Among committee recommendations is the following: “The language major should be

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structured to produce a specific outcome: educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence.”)

1. Curricula that are well-planned and tightly constructed will maintain higher enrollments and minimize “under-enrolled” classes. Offering courses in a regular rotation ensures that students can easily navigate the major.
- 2) It is also important for French programs to create and maintain connections with other programs across campus. They might do any of the following:
  - a. make sure that their courses fulfill General Education requirements, both foreign-language requirements when they exist and other requirements such as literature, humanities, or cross-cultural studies;
  - b. create or participate in an internationally-focused interdisciplinary major, requiring a number of French courses as part of the core curriculum for the major;
  - c. participate in “Foreign Languages Across the Curriculum” together with faculty from other departments;
  - d. create courses taught in English that complement other units’ curricula, or serve other interdisciplinary programs or an honors program;
  - e. sponsor on-campus programs that reach beyond French majors such as film series, speakers, student panels on study abroad, “quiz bowl” competitions on international issues, and so forth, collaborating with other units to plan and fund these whenever possible;
  - f. work with pre-professional programs such as business, engineering, health sciences, architecture, and so forth, to attract students to French courses and to study-abroad programs;
  - g. encourage study abroad, make participation in it possible for non-majors, and work to find scholarship help when needed.
- 3) When college/university French programs find opportunities to work in concert with local high-school teachers of French, they both help to strengthen the programs training their future majors and assist in recruiting students to their institution by raising its profile. This can be particularly important for state- or city-funded institutions with a particular mission to serve the public.
- 4) French program leaders also need to remain abreast of the educational mission and trends on their campus. Is the administration encouraging service-learning programs? It might be worth thinking about how to participate in that. Is there a particular focus on the use of technology? If so, the French program should take advantage of that and make sure that attention is drawn to its use in their programs. Is there a push for programs concerning the environment? If so, how might French contribute to that effort?

- 5) French faculty would do well to see how their programs might be served by creating assessment plans that highlight their focused, coherent curriculum with a set of definable outcomes. The conversation about what skills and knowledge a French major should possess on completing the program can help faculty to reflect on their major curriculum and work toward greater curricular coherence. This can also help French programs to be in tune with university priorities.
- 6) It is also important to use the campus public-relations or press office to make sure that activities involving the French program become publicly visible. The public-relations office can write press releases, articles for on-campus newsletters, and stories involving individual students that are sent to students' hometown newspapers. Send flyers to other campus units, ask other faculty to announce activities in their classes, and so forth, in order to remain visible on and off campus.

### **Advocacy Strategies**

What can a college or university French program do when, despite faculty efforts to keep a program lively and forward-looking, its existence is in fact threatened? Here, immediate actions will differ to some extent from those taken by high-school teachers. Generally, faculty cannot call on parents for any great measure of support, and usually the mechanism for program reduction or elimination is less straightforward than that in the secondary-school system.

Thus, it is crucial to be acquainted with the process by which program viability is measured at one's own institution, and to develop answers that address the questions raised in that process.

Some arguments for maintaining a French program can be made on the basis of national and international issues. Of course, there are times when the "usefulness" or practicality of French is questioned. This is the time to bring out the statistics regarding US trade with French-speaking countries, available at the AATF various Advocacy pages (such as [advocacy.frenchteachers.org](http://advocacy.frenchteachers.org)). You can also make reference to more localized economic issues, on a state or regional basis. Many AATF chapters have Advocacy web pages that give these more-local statistics. It can be useful to mention the global nature of French—the fact that it is spoken on five continents in 55 countries by 200 million speakers, is an official language of the United Nations and the Olympic Committee, and so forth (consult documents on the Resource Bank and other sites for the latest statistics).

Most effective, however, are the arguments for maintaining your particular French program at your particular institution.

First of all, make sure that those in decision-making positions are truly familiar with your program: curriculum, study abroad, and co-curriculum. Frequently administrators are unaware of the nature of advanced "content" courses like civilization and literature, presuming that we just teach the conjugation of more verbs in advanced courses. They often rely on memories of their own foreign-language courses many years ago, courses in which they may not have gone

beyond the intermediate language level, and which were taught using methods that were not communicatively-based as most are today. And many administrators do not know that advanced-level courses are instructed in French and require students to speak, read, and write all in French.

Here are some important strategies for supporting your French program:

- 1) As discussed above, the number of majors and/or minors is often one basis for judging whether or not a French program is successful. To answer that, it can be useful to point out the number of majors or minors per FTE faculty (full-time equivalent faculty member), not just per faculty member in French. You can also find out how French compares in this statistic (majors/minors per FTE) with other majors on your campus. Inquire of other (similar) institutions how many French majors per FTE they have. You can find national statistics on French enrollments overall at the MLA site: [https://apps.mla.org/flsurvey\\_search](https://apps.mla.org/flsurvey_search).

Beyond numbers, point out the quality of the students majoring in French. Point to your alumni: What success have they gone on to since graduating? Are some of them using their French training in their professions? Will they write letters of support for your program?

Institutions frequently raise the issue of "under-enrolled" classes, and often foreign-language classes seem to administrators to fit in that category. ACTFL takes as its position that class size must remain as small as possible (see their position at <https://www.actfl.org/advocacy-and-public-education/language-advocacy-resource-center>). The position of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (of the Modern Language Association) is that maximum class size in four-skills classes should be 18 (see <https://www.maps.mla.org/Resources/Policy-Statements/ADFL-General-Guidelines-for-Departments>).

- 2) Arguments for retaining a French program can also be made by talking about the issue of student recruitment for your institution. First, acquaint yourself with the recruitment strategy of your institution: is recruitment local, regional, or national? What is the profile of students whom your institution is targeting? Within that profile, what role might high-school French students play—are they likely to be students whom your school would like to recruit?

Learn the number of high-school students in your state who are taking French; although the amount of information available varies widely from state to state, the person in charge of world-language education in your state's Department of Education may have some important statistics for you. Some administrators may point to higher enrollments in Spanish in high schools, but you can show them that in fact French is often the second-highest enrolled world language, and that many of the students taking French will want to continue their study of French in college. The argument is not that other

languages are not worth studying, but rather that administrators should not treat the situation as a zero-sum game, and that eliminating French would make your institution unattractive to a significant number of prospective students.

- 3) Advocates for French programs should also stress the ways in which the French program is integrated with other programs at the university. This might happen at the level of interdisciplinary majors, or in courses that satisfy general education requirements, or team-taught courses, or joint programs with professional programs like engineering or business, or other majors or programs that count courses in French. Would eliminating or reducing the French program damage these other programs? In particular, linking with pre-professional programs and offering courses in “French for Specific Purposes” like business, engineering, medicine, hospitality, and political science can show students that studying French is a practical choice.

Also, show how your program participates in the larger life of the institution, sponsoring films or lectures or supporting other efforts taking place across campus.

- 4) How does your French program link with your institution’s overall mission and particular priorities? Is there a commitment to internationalization that will be diminished in quality with a move to eliminate French? Can you document ways in which your courses support your institution’s commitment to a liberal arts education? How do French courses support development of critical thinking skills? Of writing skills? Of cross-cultural awareness? Is there a commitment to the arts that your program links with in important ways? Do you provide support for an international business program? If your institution is charged with working with the community as many state-supported institutions are, how does your French program participate in that service?

These mission- or identity-based arguments can be crucially important: each post-secondary institution tries to define its particular niche in the landscape of higher education, and the more that you help your institution to become distinctive within its niche, the better your chances are survival are.

- 5) You will usually strengthen your case if you have an established program assessment plan and can point to successful accomplishment of the goals that the plan sets.
- 6) Since the bottom line for program maintenance is usually an economic one, be ready to make the argument about efficiency. Although French programs sometimes have smaller classes than some other disciplines (see above), we generally do not require expensive equipment or large numbers of technical support staff. Your hand is strengthened here if you have a compact curriculum and courses that do attract significant numbers of students.

- 7) Finally, call on your alumni and current students to contact the appropriate person or body to express their support for the continued existence of the French program. Ask them to talk about how they feel the French program has affected their intellectual growth and their opportunities for graduate work or professional positions, and what role the French program has had in creating their experience as a student at your institution. It may be useful to call on colleagues from other institutions or from associations like the AATF to contact the decision-makers to show the extent to which French programs are viable and strong elsewhere in the country, but evaluate your local situation before proceeding with this kind of campaign.

In short, the most important factors in advocating for a program under threat are:

- having a program that is current, vibrant, visible, and well-connected;
- knowing the institutional structures within which you must work;
- being tied closely with many other units on your campus;
- being able to quote statistics about your French program's efficiency;
- linking your program with student recruitment;
- enlisting the support of alumni.

Paying attention to these elements before there are signs that your program might be threatened can help to keep your program alive and well.