

Marketing Strategies for a New Academic Economy: Can We Sell French Without Selling Out?

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When I was asked to participate in this discussion, I was told that my comments should reflect in some way the perspective I gained by temporarily crossing the line into academic administration when I became Associate Dean of the Faculty in charge of the Humanities at my home university five years ago, an experience from which I'm still in recovery. For a moment, I am going to try to enter back into the language I spoke with my colleagues in the dean's office, an administrative language that seems somehow out of place in this more scholarly context. I'm going to speak it anyway, in an effort to provide some form of translation between two apparently alien worlds.

The first part of my presentation could be entitled "The Man Who Wanted to Turn the Library into a Credit Card and Other Stories from the Twilight Zone." I've called the world of academic administration a "twilight zone" because it is a universe interpenetrated by two very different realities: the academic life we have known and loved as faculty, and another world whose values, and even whose very existence, we tend to deny. This is the world of budget officers, financial vice presidents, trustees, alumni donors, students, parents, and others who belong to the great beyond of American economic life. In the twilight zone of academic administration, not only do these figures take on an aura of reality, but it soon becomes apparent that they have the power to shape the environment in which we professors live our profes-

sional lives. To admit the existence of these strange beings can be jarring, but it is something we in French departments, at least, can no longer afford to deny.

Probably the most unsettling experience of my stint in administration was the episode of "The Man Who Wanted to Turn the Library into a Credit Card." My university was lucky enough to have received a large sum of money for the construction of a new library, which, as you may imagine, immediately gave rise to a host of irritating committees on "The Library of the Twenty-First Century." In the course of one planning meeting, an influential person is said to have walked into the room brandishing a credit card. "Do you know," he said triumphantly, "that the entire Library of Congress can be digitized and stored on a card this size? Why don't we just take all the books out of the library and use the space for computers?"

When the faculty heard this story, apocryphal though it might have been, everyone rallied round to affirm that books were at the center of the university. It was a beautiful moment. Even the economists who spend their days crunching numbers gleaned from on-line sources spoke fondly of browsing in the stacks, and physicists waxed lyrical about rummaging through the archives. In fact, in the euphoria of the moment, we proposed installing an espresso bar so that we could all spend more pleasant scholarly moments in the library.

But if this quasi-serious proposal had originally struck terror into our hearts, it is because it posed a threat that was at the same time very real and heavily symbolic for the Humanities, and especially those of us in foreign languages and literatures. Even though all our colleagues spoke lovingly about the importance of books, we all know who among us are most dependent on the printed word; we all know whose books are the first to be sent off to storage and the last to be digitized. The man with the credit card was a fitting representative of the two forces that have come to pose a serious threat to the survival of a number of traditional academic disciplines in the last thirty or so years: science and technology on the one hand, and the market economy on the other.

The boom in science and technology has certainly had a negative effect on our part of the profession. Currently, in a typical entering class at an unnamed Ivy League college—and I am assured that things are the same all over, or worse—over half the class will express an interest in majoring in the Sciences and a bit less than a third will indicate a preference for the Social Sciences, leaving a sixth of the class or fewer who express interest in the Humanities, including the Arts. Now, we know that many of these would-be science majors will eventually find other interests—or realize that you can get into medical school without actually having to major in a science—but we’ve also learned from experience that most of the science dropouts will end up in Social Science, probably in the “hard” disciplines like Government and Economics, rather than in the Humanities. On a longer-term basis the figures are even more discouraging, and here I’m referring to statistics gathered by James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield published in the May/June 1998 issue of the *Harvard Alumni Magazine*. Between 1970 and 1994 the number of undergraduate degrees in the U.S. increased by almost 40%, but over that period the number of degrees granted in English, Foreign Languages, Philosophy, and Religion actually declined. It is not by coincidence that the departments shut down during the budget-crisis years in the early 1990s were in these areas, especially foreign languages and religion.

According to Engell and Dangerfield, since universities have entered what they call “the age of money,” the future of the Humanities in general has become directly related to the market economy, because, they contend, students make academic choices on the basis of three criteria, all related to money, choosing fields that offer one or more of the following qualities:

“A Knowledge of Money,” that is, a field that studies money, like business and economics.

“A Source of Money,” a field that receives significant external support, like the sciences

or “A Promise of Money,” a field that is popularly linked (even if erroneously) to improved chances of entering a profession with above average lifetime earnings.

I don't think I need to spell out just where this leaves French. As a quick note of cheer, I can tell you that since 1960 the number of students studying a foreign language in college has been cut in half (not that the study of foreign languages has ever been a major priority for Americans). And within this reduced number, if the students are taking any language at all, chances are it's Spanish.

The decline of interest in foreign languages has been particularly hard on French. French has never really succeeded in pretending to be utilitarian, as have Spanish or Russian, for example. Nor has French been able to cash in on the current trend of "heritage languages," as have Italian, Hebrew, or even, in some cases, Yoruba and Swahili. French has always operated on the other end of the spectrum, as a "high-culture" language, essential for understanding the monuments of European culture and providing cocktail party chic. And, of course, it was the "language of diplomacy," although this is largely a thing of the past. Even in largely francophone Brussels, the European economy is now being conducted more and more in English, according to the current French press.

Of equal concern to us, in this age of postmodernism, the "high culture" values long associated with French seem to have lost their cachet, their value waning as rapidly as the Euro, and perhaps for similar reasons. Perhaps we should simply join the chorus of lamentation that sees the traditional values of French culture as being trampled underfoot by a soulless, market-driven American economy, an explanation that is used in France these days to explain everything from the state of French cinema to the spread of shopping malls to the importation of bananas. To retreat to the bastion of tradition is certainly the easy answer for those of us who enjoy, as do many people in France, security of employment and a good retirement policy. But what, as they say, about "les jeunes" 'the young'? Is there any future for French in the United States, or will French Departments soon become a thing of the past?

Before I got into the dean's office, I used to brush away discussions like this with great irritation, saying blithely, "We can't let student fads determine our academic curriculum." That was

before I found myself forced to participate in tough decisions about resource allocation within the university and constantly obliged to defend and justify Humanities positions, especially in the languages. Does a relatively small liberal arts college or university really need to teach languages like Hebrew and Arabic? And what about Russian? How could I justify keeping the number of positions we currently have in French when I could see with my own eyes Spanish language students literally bursting out of overcrowded classrooms? I actually had to take away a position from *my own* department, a position I had successfully argued for as department chair, which we managed to get back only through an astute joint hire with Linguistics. This was a low point for me and brought home the reality of the situation.

Our field is in real danger. Among the small liberal arts colleges, Bennington has already led the way toward the complete marginalization of foreign languages. Unlike Russian, few French Departments have actually been eliminated, but they are being swallowed up and subsequently dissolved by the digestive process of large generic departments of “languages” or “literature” or whatever the new term may turn out to be, departments in which positions can more easily be shifted to Spanish, or even away from languages altogether, without anyone really noticing. With the recent upturn in the economy, this situation has generally stabilized; our Language Consortium figures show that French enrollments are more or less the same each year, after the sharp downturn in the late 1980s. But it’s not turning around, and the next budget crisis is going to erode our position—and positions—even further.

It’s easy for us as faculty to castigate the philistinism of arbitrary administrative decisions as we run off to the library, but these decisions are going to be made, and they will ultimately affect the way we teach our discipline—whether, indeed, we have a discipline left to teach. I’ve been doing some department reviewing at various places over the last few years, and I was particularly struck by the plight of one Modern Language Department in which two faculty members in French were trying to “cover” a French curriculum formerly taught by eight people.

Needless to say, the curriculum is not being, in any sense, covered, and these two people, both of whom have been productive research scholars, are suffering from the stress.

In the face of this situation, I confess I feel a great deal of impatience with colleagues, who continue like my former self, to talk about tightening up requirements so that all our majors have a good grounding in the classics of French literature. I have become impatient with the French journalists who castigate us in *Le Monde* for teaching gender studies and francophone writers when we should be teaching Balzac and Proust. And I even feel impatient with the liberal, multicultural author Sami Naïr, who, in his recent book, *L'Immigration expliquée à ma fille*, insists on defining French cultural values (and this is not atypical) in terms of Ronsard and Bossuet, whom he arrays against the alternative of Rambo. Even Naïr's teen-aged daughter responds to this one with, "Bossuet, Papa? Bien nostalgique, non?" (38). I find myself reflecting that it may be this tendency to define French culture exclusively in terms of Ronsard and Bossuet that makes it seem so distant from the concerns of the *jeunes* of the French *banlieue*, especially the *jeunes immigrés* with whom Naïr is apparently concerned. This "high-culture" concept of French certainly makes it distant from our own students. Surely there is something other than Bossuet standing between Ronsard and Rambo. If not, I fear the most pessimistic scenarios of French cultural decline may be fulfilled.

But another French Department I visited recently was a welcome change from the first one I described. This was a small department in a liberal arts college in a state where Spanish should have been the dominant foreign language. But this department was holding its own, and more than that. I actually ended up recommending the addition of a new permanent position, and that does not often happen in a French Department these days.

The first thing that struck me about the people in this department is that they were working hard, and, despite their often divergent interests, they were working together. The days are over when we could afford to laugh complicitously at jokes about the Romance Language Department lacking romance, or even de-

cent collegial relationships. I've grown impatient with our colleagues who haven't yet realized it's time, in a sense, to circle the wagons.

But what were they doing in terms of the curriculum? Oddly enough, they were doing very much what we do in the Colloquium on Twentieth Century French Studies, but they were doing it in the context of their course offerings. And this strategy proved to have many practical advantages. Just to make things clear, I want to argue, on a practical, down-to-earth, administrative basis, that it is precisely the intellectual values embodied by the new concept of French Studies that are likely to give us the hope of surviving into the next century.

I don't mean to say that everyone in this small department was a *vingtièmiste*, but there was an important emphasis on contemporary issues and modern French culture. At least two of the five people in this department did happen to work in the twentieth century, among others, and they were able to avail themselves of the services of a nearby francophone specialist. Frankly, from a dean's eye view, I could argue that this proportion, where at least half of the department has competence in a contemporary field, is perhaps the way of the future, and I would add that a basic understanding of contemporary French culture is essential for anyone teaching in a French Department today, no matter what their field of specialization. At least in the smaller liberal arts colleges, I think it's time to rethink the old "one person per century" approach to hiring and to begin restructuring our departments, and our curriculum, along other lines.

We might want to scrap the concept of periodicity almost entirely and divide our field in other ways—perhaps by genre or thematic issues. The small department I visited was doing very well with a theater course that managed to attract students in large numbers to material from the traditionally unsaleable "early periods." Students seemed delighted by the opportunity to act in medieval farces or tragedies by Racine, although they might have balked at signing up for courses solemnly labeled "Medieval Literature" or "French Classical Drama." Another genre with a privileged place in our curriculum should certainly be film, an area

of interest to students that French Departments have too easily given away to our colleagues in Film Studies. Now that even the required reading for the French *bac* includes film—or at least *La Règle du jeu*, which is a commendable beginning—we no longer need feel so defensive about teaching cinema. The “reading skills” we take pride in teaching our students should include the ability to read, analyze, and critique the visual media that dominate much of contemporary communication. And most current film, whether it be *La Haine* or *La Vie rêvée des anges*, remains firmly anchored in the complex world of contemporary French reality to which we are trying to introduce our students at every level.

But whatever we do, an understanding of contemporary French reality can provide a way of making even the traditionally low-enrollment “earlier periods” more accessible to students, as in a course offered in my own department which looks at the seventeenth century as a formative period for current concepts of French identity. As opposed to the journalist in *Le Monde* several years ago who castigated American French professors for reading texts through the lens of gender studies or multiculturalism, I do not see this as simply catering to student interests. In fact, it is a way of catering to our own interests and reenergizing our teaching.

Not only was the small department I visited aware of contemporary issues, but in all their courses they emphasized an understanding of culture as a whole, an approach that dominates our French Studies colloquium, as opposed to the New Critical sacralization of the isolated literary text. This is an approach that appeals to me and to many of us on a purely intellectual level, but, as I was able to see, it has some very practical consequences for the survival of our field.

On one level, it is a means of unifying an entire curriculum. As one of my colleagues in Slavic at Harvard keeps pointing out, we are no longer teaching language, as separate from literature—or literature as separate from language. We are teaching French and francophone culture from one end of the curriculum to the other. This has the advantage of lending intellectual excitement to what some once considered the nether world of elementary

language instruction and of broadening the audience for our advanced courses. This concept of the unified curriculum is also very useful in preventing administrators from using the ultimate department-dissolving weapon, as embodied in the Bennington Solution—that is, the tactic of cutting the language courses off from the upper-level French curriculum and farming them out to low-paid part-time workers, in the case of Bennington, to the local high schools. As attractive as it might appear to offload the work-laden language courses on part-time labor, this is an invitation to self-destruction, since the language courses have a built-in enrollment level, which is more than you can say for the seminar on Bossuet. More important, these language courses offer the best chance we have of creating an audience for a seminar on Bossuet, if we really want to offer it.

Another practical consequence of a more culturally-oriented approach is its inevitable relationship to interdisciplinary teaching. In the small department I've been discussing, as is the case with most successful French Departments, all the faculty were involved in interdisciplinary teaching outside the department, to the point where they had become a mainstay of the institution. If positions were to be cut back at the institution, I imagine the cuts would not fall too heavily on French—these people are far too valuable to lose. As a matter of personal curiosity, when I was in the dean's office I spent some time trying to find out the reasons behind the elimination of several Religion Departments during the budget crises of the early 1990s. In each individual case, I was almost always told that members of the eliminated department had been isolated from their colleagues, both intellectually and politically. This should not need to happen to us in French, since we are particularly well-placed to participate in current intellectual discourse, if we make the effort to move out from our embattled enclave.

The emphasis on culture also makes us well-placed to prepare our students for participation in the so-called real world, which these days happens to be a world of multiculturalism and globalization, just what we know so well. As part of the research I did for this paper, I asked a former student who is doing very well

at a New York investment banking firm what he got out of studying French, besides a keen interest in wine and a French wife. Tony tells me we taught him to understand how people are shaped by their cultural context, a knowledge he calls upon when dealing with clients from all over the world. In our professional conferences and research journals, we are developing powerful tools for cultural analysis. The material that prestigious business programs at schools like Wharton and Chicago are offering to selected MBA students, we can provide to our undergraduates as a matter of course. This is valuable knowledge, and to use the language of Engell and Dangerfield, it even holds the "promise of money."

And we are not limiting ourselves to the culture of France alone. In an era of globalization, the French language is a key to a whole francophone world, offering an opportunity to enter a number of cultures on their own terms. And with francophone texts, there is no thought of abstracting them from their cultural contexts. To read Mariama Bâ or Tahar Ben Jelloun is to enter into another cultural reality, and students of francophone literature, more than others, naturally find themselves moving back and forth between History, Political Science, Anthropology, Geography, Music and Religion as they follow the thread of their interest. Just as the organizers of the Colloquium in Twentieth Century French Studies have from the beginning given francophone panels an important place on the program, our students are quick to recognize the intrinsic interest of this material. In my own department, our francophone course is the one non-required course offered in French every year that consistently gets high enrollments. I find that more and more of my students are applying to international programs at places like Tufts and Georgetown, in preference to Ph.D. programs in French. But I'm not sure any of us in francophone literature finds this a matter of great concern. I'm proud of my former student, an executive of Save the Children, who told me about using his French to communicate with children fleeing the massacres in Rwanda. He is carrying on the basic values of our profession, as far as I'm concerned.

To quickly move to some sort of conclusion, I would return to the question I posed in my title, "Can we sell French without selling out?" What I have been arguing is that restructuring our departments around the premises underlying our own understanding of French Studies can actually help us to "sell" French. In the eyes of the purist critic of *Le Monde*, I suppose that almost everything that goes on in the new French Studies developed in the United States is, in a sense, "selling out," a betrayal of a certain vision of French literary study. But for the rest of us, it is simply a matter of using the insights of our research to shape our teaching and allowing our students to participate in the enthusiasm we ourselves feel for our field.

Works Cited

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