Curriculum Development and Institutional Strategic Planning

My talk discussed the alignment of foreign language curricular in higher education with larger institutional missions. A recent experience inspired these remarks: In August, I joined Vanderbilt University’s Center for Second Language Studies as a scholar-in-residence for this current academic year. I am also affiliated with the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages at Vanderbilt. My home institution, however, is the University of Texas at Austin. As I am progressing into a mid-career situation, this residency exposes me to language curriculum development initiatives that are framed and supported by a different institutional setting.

When I arrived in Nashville in August, the buzz on campus was the recently published *Academic Strategic Plan for Vanderbilt University*. Authored based on input from a number of campus-wide committees, the plan highlights four themes, some of which immediate resonate with collegiate foreign language education. These themes are (1) Undergraduate Residential Experience, (2) Trans-Institutional Planning, (3) Healthcare Solutions, and (4) Educational Technologies.

My presentation described how different the two units that I am affiliated with respond to this situation: on the one hand, the very dynamic Center for Second Language Studies (CSLS, and on the other hand, the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages, a rather traditional humanities department. The CSLS, only established four years ago, sees the strategic plan as an opportunities and within days has started to incubate projects that increase the alignment of the center with the explicitly stated mission of the university. The department, in contrast, appears to be more than a bit overwhelmed by the strategic plan.

I also compared the situation at Vanderbilt University with my home institution, the University of Texas at Austin. Although peer-institutions, these organizations have different underlying funding models and governance systems. As a state institution, the Texas Legislature is an important stakeholder. This orientation contrasts Vanderbilt’s private governance model that relies to a much larger extend on alumni contribution and philanthropic engagement. More importantly, UT-Austin does not have a university-wide strategic plan that could provide individual departments with opportunities to align their activity through a set of unifying themes. As a large comprehensive R-1 state university, UT Austin has – although unstated – a broader mission than most private R1s. Despite excellence across a broad variety of fields, many private R1 are identified by the public (including alumni and foundations) through a particular focus. Examples include STEM at MIT and Stanford, International Relations and Diplomacy at Georgetown, or Healthcare are Emory and Vanderbilt. Whereas Vanderbilt seems to be in the process to codify its focus areas through this strategic plan, which also serves as a fundraising tool, such initiatives seem less critical at public comprehensive institutions such as UT-Austin that appear to continue to hold on to the model of a broad comprehensive education.

All institutions do strategic planning, regardless if the publish such a plan or not. Foreign language programs that want to thrive and increase their footprint on their campus need to be aware of their institutions’ priorities – this includes stated and unstated overarching educational objectives for the institution at large. Foreign language programs that want to offer relevant options need to align their programs with these priorities in order to stay relevant. In the case of my current host institution, such efforts may very well mean that we as language program directors have to solidify our connections to constituencies on campus outside the humanities in order to create curricular structures and content areas that resonate with areas that enjoy institutional priorities and are attractive to a large number undergraduate students. Based on my current insights into these processes, “young centers” appear more agile compared to “old national literature departments” in their efforts to adopt to transformations in higher education that are codified and promoted through the publication of an institution-wide strategic plan.