

Vital Advocacy: Information, Alliances and Program Presence

When I was a high-school coach, I was used to hearing my colleagues say "The best defense is good offence." It is indeed discouraging and stressful to have to defend an effective French program, so here are three tips for maximizing your "time of possession", that is to say, while your program is not being seriously challenged.

- **First**, you create a public presence for what you do with students, as a "French program". This means making intentional references to it as a "program", even if you are the only teacher and teach two or three courses. If you don't have one already, start a French Club. Every time your classes or the French Club do anything special, make sure your community knows about it (guest speaker, dinner-and-a-movie, community or educational service, involvement with exchange students, field trip, bake sale, etc) through your school or local newspaper or newsblog, events podcasting system, local radio or television station. Keep a scrap-book and a web site, blog, or Facebook page with photos. Now there are at least three of you serving students; French club, teacher(s), program. Three is a more influential number than one, and since a teacher is no longer the sole representative of French, if the teacher leaves, this is less likely to imply the end of French. Those who are French teachers, you know best how to make your program engaging, relevant, informative and excellent. Even if you are already using promotional materials from the AATF national advocacy web site*, it is a good idea to localize your publicity with a reference to your local program. Attach a note with "Find out about our French program at..." to posters and other materials.

- **Second** is an assessment of all the potentially influential people around you locally in the construction of strategic alliances. Naturally the AATF will stand by a good French program, but in some cases, we are just viewed as outsiders with vested interests. How about your

students, alumni, their parents, guidance counselors, the school board, the PTO local and state politicians? How about that colleague in Geography or History, who spoke in your class about the European Union or the French and Indian War? Are there French speakers living in your part of the state? Any one of them is a potential ally. Is there a French historical presence in your community or region? Then there is probably a local history society with members who might be concerned about the health of a French program. Are there French-owned and Francophone-owned businesses nearby, or perhaps local companies with offices or a big-time exporting stake in French-speaking countries? Representatives from all of these could speak to the issue of the importance of French. Pick potential allies carefully, because alliances can go two ways. You may wind up going to a few more meetings or eating lunch with a different crowd once in a while, but you will very likely extend the resource base of your program and you will find out that French matters to people outside of your classroom.

- **The third**, information, is paramount. Without it, French is just another small high-quality program, and you have no way of identifying the expert-witness status of allies. What kind of information you have is also crucial. While the arguable national and international relevance of French available from two well-known web sources** may seem weighty enough to sway the cynics in a Senate hearing, it may not have the desired effect on local power players. These people are much more concerned with keeping the auto-parts factory in town, attracting the photonic router company to the industrial park, and making sure the district's high-school graduates can get jobs in one or the other. What they want is state and local-specific information about why knowledge of French and French-speaking cultures may be beneficial to their constituencies right where they live with pertinent demographic, economic, social, and historical connections. This is why the AATF national advocacy web site* links you to information about the 41 states for which there is either a state-specific French advocacy web site or an official AATF French advocacy fact pack. Now you have a start on information relative to where you live. It is up to you to do two

things using this web site: 1) Find and expand the information which is truly local to your district, county or metropolitan area. 2) Using the section called "Local Level - Profiling School Districts where French programs are in trouble", make as complete a description of your school district as you can. Allies from outside the school or districts will be able to combine this with other information to become the fully informed advocates you want. Develop activities for your students based on the French connections you have found. Reward students who sleuth new legitimate information about local French connections. Perhaps your classes and your French club could even develop a newsletter for parents, the school and your network of allies, which would include this French connection material, in addition to reports on French Club activity, field trips, and a Francophone culture feature.

Program presence, alliances and information are the proverbial legs of the tripod or three-legged stool, and no program missing one of these will remain standing in the political adversity of today's educational institutions or the severe budget constraints of our recessionary times. However, these are not an auto-pilot for an advocacy campaign. You cannot "set it and forget it", like something in an infomercial. Advocacy is often dynamic, interactive and strategic all at once; so, your constant vigilance and action should lead to something other than a flood of letters to the school board. Remember that in the end, your charge is to bring about an abiding belief in the necessity and beneficial nature of your program; not simply a reprieve for it.

Robert D. Peckham, PhD
AATF Advocacy Commission Chair
Professor of French
University of Tennessee at Martin

Web References:

- The French Language Initiative (The World Speaks French)

<http://www.theworldspeaksfrench.org/>

****French - The Most Practical Foreign Language**

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

****On the Importance of Knowing French**

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