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# ASSESSMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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**T**he central question in assessment, how to measure what graduates know at the end of a four-year program of study, can be divided into two categories for any foreign language major: first, the graduate's level of proficiency in the four skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening must be measured; and second, the so-called fifth skill of "culture" must also be evaluated. However, before assessment can begin, the body of knowledge and/or skills the graduates should possess must be identified. The proposals submitted for the B.A. and the B.S.Ed. programs in both French and Spanish identified a desired level of proficiency in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing for the majority of graduates. Delineation of the "cultural knowledge and/or skills" is far more difficult and has not been completed.

Consequently, when considering assessment in the field of foreign languages, the first category above, "the four skills," is straightforward and can be evaluated using the "ACTFL Proficiency guidelines" (developed under the auspices of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, or ACTFL). These Guidelines outline what a student should be able "to do" with the foreign language as well as the degree of accuracy expected at steadily increasing levels of proficiency. For example, in the beginning the students will be limited to memorized words and sentences such as greeting people, saying goodbye, identifying themselves, and asking and answering simple questions in the present tense. From this point students move to descriptions of themselves and others, always in the present tense. Gradually their vocabulary and control over basic structures

increase. Thus, the program emphasizes communication, basic at first but increasingly sophisticated, as the student moves from one level to the next. In such a proficiency-based curriculum, speaking and listening skills can be measured by the "ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview." No similar test presently exists to evaluate writing and reading skills, but a body of research on the topic exists and is constantly expanding. In addition, the department is working to introduce reading and writing into all courses, beginning with "101," on a more systematic basis. Hence, with a thorough grounding in the "proficiency levels," faculty could develop an adequate measure of a student's reading and writing skills in the foreign language.

Measuring cultural knowledge, on the other hand, is far more difficult. How does one define culture? How does one determine what cultural knowledge is essential for a four-year degree program? How does one deal with the diversity of the Hispanic or Francophone world, or the Slavic, or that of any other language group? Other than perhaps the literary "canon," there is no generally accepted "cultural canon" for any language. After an initial attempt to define "cultural proficiency," even ACTFL, at least for the present, abandoned a description of "culture" in the "ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines." In short, one descends into the realm of almost absolute subjectivity when attempting to assess "cultural competence" in a foreign language. Yet if assessment is truly just around the corner, some consensus must be reached. If our goal is to provide students with a broad-based liberal arts education, "culture," whatever it might be, cannot be omitted; it is an integral part of a liberal arts program.

Although it may be a truism that "language is culture and culture is language," for the purpose of assessment the two must be separated. How that is to be accomplished remains to be decided. ●

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