The Kenyon Intensive Language Model: the Key to Our Success

Early in the 1970s I took a Kenyon catalogue off the book shelf in my office to research a matter of concern to me. It was the catalogue from 1968, the lone book sitting on my shelf when I arrived in 1969. At first, my interest in the catalogue had been prompted by what the college had to say about itself. By the mid1970s I was anxious to know how the curriculum of the college represented the world of knowledge. What I found, to put it mildly, was shocking. All of the courses offered in 1968 were focused on the United States and Western Europe with the exception of a course on religion in the Middle East and another course the subject of which I don’t remember. Perhaps it was a course on the Soviet Union.

By this time I had gotten to know the provost, Bruce Haywood, and relevant faculty well, and I was beginning to feel that I had a real stake in the college. My sense from Provost Haywood was that the college had severe financial problems exacerbated by almost a decade of neglect of fundraising. I remember a colleague who came to me to ask if I could “spare” a paper clip. It sounded like a joke, but it wasn’t. The college was going through a period of stagnation that the addition of women students was designed to alleviate. Their presence would, it was hoped, flesh out and diversify our course offerings and put much needed cash in our coffers.

As much as I liked colleagues in other departments, they seemed more than satisfied with the narrowness of our curriculum. As one put it, “What does Latin America have to teach us?” Another asked “Why should our students study Spanish, to talk to their maids?” It was clear that the extent of faculty knowledge about the Spanish language and the history, political science, anthropology, and sociology of Latin America could fit in a thimble and that they were not troubled by their ignorance. When they really needed to know something about Cuba, the Panama Canal, Chile, Argentina, and later El Salvador they could read the newspaper. If they wanted to learn about Israel and the Arab world, there were two professors to talk to in the religion department. Did they? My sense was that conversations with faculty with expertise in areas of the world not related to a faculty member’s specialty virtually never occurred. All that we needed to know about things beyond our expertise was readily available on TV news programs, newspapers and magazines. Putting our trust there seems laughable today.

Our course offerings seemed to suggest that what students needed to know about the world was best illustrated by what had happened over the centuries in the United States and Western Europe. And this was exactly what the college had to offer. The big concern in academia at that time was the divide between the “two cultures.” On one side of middle path we had the humanities, arts, and social sciences; the other side was home to the sciences, and the college seemed satisfied that our curriculum and course requirements would also delight C. P. Snow. We illustrated every aspect of the western tradition. We were quite proud of ourselves. Nevertheless, I was uneasy. A friend who taught at another institution seemed to express the problem well. “Kenyon’s course offerings are stuck in the nineteenth century,” he said.

We were conveying to our students and to ourselves the sense that nothing outside the realm of what we were offering to our students was of much significance to their education. That they didn’t learn anything at Kenyon about Latin America, Africa, or Asia was not a loss. If something of significance had occurred, in those places, wouldn’t the world know about it? It made me feel that what I was doing: teaching language and an occasional literature course containing Latin American authors, was inconsequential in the grand scheme of a Kenyon education as envisioned by the Kenyon faculty.

This realization hit home on two occasions in the 1970s. The first occurred when Ed Hecht proposed to the provost in 1975 that we investigate the intensive language program that was being offered at Dartmouth. Ed’s proposal was rejected. I never heard or read the provost’s response to Ed, but it was clear that he was opposed to any investment in time or money in language teaching. In what was perhaps meant to be a response to us all, the provost, who had been a member of our department, called a meeting that was held during an evening in Bob Goodhand’s house. None of us knew what was on the agenda, but we understood that an evening meeting with the provost meant that something of great significance for the department was to be discussed. Early in the discussion the provost let it be known that he thought it was futile to teach languages at the college level. For language learning we had high school programs, Berlitz, and summers abroad. Colleges and universities were places of intellectual challenge. Students should not be forced to forsake the intellectual stimuli of the humanities, sciences, social sciences, and the arts for the rote learning of language study. His solution was for the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures to merge with the English Department and to abandon language teaching. Ed Harvey, the senior member of the department, burst out, “We lambs ain’t going to lie down with them lions.” To Bruce Haywood’s credit, he took that as our department’s answer. Later that year my colleague in Spanish Joan Gilabert who had come in 1971 was asked to postpone his tenure decision. Joan was an excellent teacher. It was clear that the provost was unsure about the future of language teaching and the financial stability of the college. Joan felt that that was the last straw for him, and he accepted a position at the University of Arizona. He was replaced by a faculty wife whose position was reduced a year later to part time.

Things changed for the better for me in 1977. I had a sabbatical and was asked by Antioch College to go to Bogotá to evaluate the Latin American studies program that they ran for the GLCA. As part of my report on my activities during my sabbatical I sent to the provost my enthusiastic evaluation of Antioch’s program. I should mention that Antioch’s reputation at Kenyon was dismal; you risked your reputation if you said anything good about it. What I found was a revelation. The salaries that the GLCA were paying to the program’s faculty were higher than university salaries in Colombia. Antioch had hired many of the best faculty available anywhere in the country. They had extraordinary guest speakers in a variety of disciplines coming every semester to lecture to classes. The Kenyon students on the program were ecstatic. I was bowled over. I finished my report to the provost by saying that I would wholeheartedly endorse the program to Kenyon students.

A few months later the provost asked me to see him. To my surprise, he wanted me to establish a Latin American Studies program at Kenyon. What he didn’t know was that the president of the Latin American Studies Association, William Glade, had been a colleague of mine at the University of Wisconsin. I wrote to Glade and got a box of materials about small college Latin American Studies programs. I put together a program based on the best that I saw in those programs. The provost had told me that the Latin Americanist in anthropology at Kenyon and the person who would be hired in political science would become members of the program. His reason for doing this was to expand our course offerings to another area of the world in a way that would complement in an inclusive way what we were doing in the United States and Western Europe. I was astonished. What I didn’t know was that this impetus would gather momentum and make possible things that hitherto were only fantasy.

In 1979 professor of French Bob Goodhand went to Denison University and sat in on a French class modeled on the ones offered at Dartmouth. Bob was so favorably impressed that he applied for a grant that would allow Kenyon to create an intensive language program. He was successful and given $90,000 to run the program for three years. What Bob didn’t know was that in order to apply for a grant to establish an academic program at Kenyon he had first to get administration and faculty approval. The administration was not happy with this turn of events because it obligated the college to fund the program after the foundation money ran out. Fortunately, I was on the Academic Policy Committee and was able to overcome a few faculty objections, the most serious of which was the amount of credit to give students in an intensive course and the amount of credit to give faculty toward satisfaction of their teaching load. As the principal objector put it, “A course is a course, and if it requires language teachers and students to spend more time in the classroom than those in other disciplines, they should not be rewarded with more credit.” Fortunately, other faculty on the committee were willing to accept the argument that language study required more sustained contact between faculty and students and that more work should be rewarded with more credit.

At a meeting of the department Bob Goodhand proposed that we allow French to initiate the program on an experimental basis. I countered that we should do it in all the modern languages because we were all eager to have such a program and were convinced that it would be a success. We adopted my suggestion and invited Professor John Rassias, the creator of the Dartmouth program to train us. One of the first things that he said at our initial meeting was that we were the first college to adopt the program in all its languages. In a private conversation with me he said that at other colleges many language faculty were skeptical about intensive language study. He was obviously pleased with our receptiveness.

Perhaps the most pleasing effect from a faculty perspective was that the intensive language program united the department. We were no longer a collection of individuals who literally did not speak the language that others taught; we were now equal participants in a pedagogical project that would benefit us all. Ed Harvey had made it a point to encourage cooperation in the department, but this was the first time that we could work together for a common goal. Intensive instruction in all our languages became the cornerstone, the one common factor in all that we did.

By 1979 Latin American Studies became a reality. Although it was a “concentration” and not a “major” it became the model for the International Studies Program established in 1982 that was a major. Provost Haywood had left and the new provost encouraged the departments in the social sciences and the MLL to join an effort to create an interdisciplinary major that would require departments to add courses about what then was commonly referred to as the second and third world. This had a fortuitous benefit for our department. In 1979 Peter Seymour, Bob Goodhand and I had met in the summer to revise our majors. It had become clear that world events were influencing our students to look for something more than a major in literature in our disciplines. Other colleges similar to Kenyon were experiencing similar changes in student interests. I brought catalogues that I had collected during my research for Latin American Studies programs.

The outcome of our discussions resulted in a proposal accepted by the department to create majors in language studies and in area studies. The language major required advanced study in two languages and study abroad. Our area studies majors were mostly in the first world and did not compete with the new program established by the college a year later in International Studies. These new majors gave the department a presence and a stake in majors in other disciplines, thereby increasing our importance to the college.

In 1980 financial difficulties at Antioch led the GLCA to decide to give the administration of the program in Bogotá to another member of the consortium. I told the provost about this development and he assigned to me the task of writing the proposal. Kenyon was successful, and I was appointed director of the program.

The advancing technology of the 1980s brought about numerous changes in the department. Our course offerings were now on the internet. Many more potential enrollees at the college were finding us. When interviewed, they would tell us that they were impressed by the language department’s diverse majors and the many possibilities for them to combine their interests in a unique program of study. (Something that surprised me were the several Latin American Studies majors who were interested in medicine. One went to Latin America and participated in a program to study chagas disease, another studied dysentery in Central America. Both won prestigious fellowships to medical school.) Faculty in languages became engaged in creating and using computer programs to teach topics that would engage students in further investigation of matters broached in their language text books.

All of these curricular changes were made possible, at least in part, by the creation of the intensive language program. A student who began study in a language at Kenyon at the beginning level could now advance quickly in proficiency and do work at the level of the major in the junior year. Prior to this, students who began a language at Kenyon could not accumulate enough credits in the major in four years. Where intensive language study had a decisive impact was in lesser taught languages. For with just two faculty members and a first year course that enabled students to take a traditional third year course in the second year, Russian and Italian, languages added to the curriculum in the 1980s, could now produce fully qualified majors.

Chinese and Japanese, added toward the end of the decade, attracted many students to the college. Here again we saw the benefits of an intensive language program. Without this program students would have been forced to go to summer school to accumulate enough credits to satisfy a major.

With the presence of the intensive language program and native assistants living with students in the dormitories and serving as “apprentice teachers” in KILM it was possible in the 1980s for the department to provide extra-curricular activities for language students. Unfortunately, given changes in student housing options, the need for more office space, and the impossibility of designating a dormitory as a language house, the department was no longer able to sponsor these valuable activities.

One final change in college policy added to the attractiveness of our language program. The college had eliminated the language requirement in the 1960s and replaced it with what it called the “guided elective” system. The course offerings of the entire college were divided into nine groups. In order to graduate a student was required to complete a year’s work in seven of the nine. Language study was one of the groups. This system, though popular, allowed a student to avoid language study entirely. By the late 1990s many Kenyon faculty were beginning to return to the view that proficiency in other languages was a significant component of a Kenyon education. Professor of French, Jane Cowles, was a member of the committee that proposed the reinstatement of the language requirement to the faculty. Thanks to Jane's efforts and the intensive language program we now have a language requirement that all students must fulfill, either by passing the placement test at the advanced level or by enrolling in an intensive language course. By whichever method a student satisfies the requirement, it is gratifying to note how many students take language and literature courses *after* having satisfied the requirements.

In summary, I think it fair to say that the growth in language faculty that made our department the largest in the college came about thanks to factors that seemed to coalesce around the institution of the Kenyon Intensive Language Model. KILM attracted students interested in language study to the college. It allowed them to achieve an advanced level of proficiency in one year. Students who reached that level were encouraged by their achievement to do further study in language and literature, thereby allowing our disciplines to add faculty. (During the first five years of KILM between 30 % and 50% who had completed the intensive program enrolled in further study.) KILM made the reinstatement of the language requirement attractive to the faculty: it would allow students to complete a two year language requirement in one, thereby freeing them to take courses sooner in other disciplines. KILM was attractive to students wishing to major in language studies: it allowed them to achieve fluency quicker in a second language. KILM allowed students beginning a major in area studies to complete the reading requirements in their courses earlier. KILM is clearly the foundation of all we do in our department. Without it we surely wouldn’t be enjoying the success we have today. When I arrived at Kenyon, there were an equal number of faculty in modern languages and classical languages. Today, the Department of Classics has not grown and the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures is now the largest department in the college.