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Between Quantity and Quality: High Schools and the Iowa State University German Program

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Introduction

For many years, anecdotal evidence has accumulated that high school German programs have suffered cutbacks due to the precedence of numerous other curricular and political priorities in secondary education. While it is exceedingly difficult to find or generate clear longitudinal data to support this claim, there is copious anecdotal material that reveals structural changes affecting high school German programs over the past 20 years, changes that have resulted in multiple challenges including:

- attenuation of personal ties to German-speaking immigrant ancestors (across the USA, but particularly prevalent in the mid-Atlantic and the Upper Midwest).
- loss of teaching personnel with strong personal investments in German-speaking ancestry and communities.

- loss of the ‘strategic’ position of Germany and the German language after the end of the Cold War.
- structural shifts in the priorities of high school instruction including:
- the ongoing prioritization of Spanish programs due to the perception that Spanish has become the most important non-English language in the USA.
- higher emphasis on basic skills through policy initiatives like No Child Left Behind to the exclusion of educational goals perceived as higher-order, like world languages and arts.
- development of interest in other less-commonly-taught languages perceived as strategic or growth areas, like Chinese.

Furthermore, the complex relationships between secondary education and college- or university-level programs in world languages, along with the widely varying enrollment success of college and university German programs across the country, generate difficulties for attempts to generate reliable data and conclusions about best practices. The pedagogical and scholarly challenges facing educators in both secondary and higher education also leave little time or incentive to look beyond immediate programmatic, pedagogical, and intellectual needs. Little scholarly literature has therefore accumulated that explores the character of the articulation of secondary and university education in German, to speak nothing of world languages in general. Some recent qualitative and anecdotal reflection about postsecondary German programs does explore these problems fruitfully; Wehage is a fine example. A few studies have explored the high-school to postsecondary transition in German, but all are hampered by small sample sizes and high institutional specificity. Macaro and Wingate, for example, are primarily interested in the transition of students in the UK from state-supported secondary schools (i.e. not the high-prestige ‘independent’ schools) to the University of Oxford, a situation that is not comparable to the experience of most US students outside a very few extremely high-prestige colleges and universities. Some promising language-independent or institution-independent work (see Chalhoub-Deville; Corl et al.; LeBlanc and Lally) on secondary-to-postsecondary transition was done in Ohio, Florida, and Minnesota in the 1990s, but appears to have had limited application due to lack of long-term resource allocation at the statewide level. The study with perhaps the greatest similarity to the one presented here is found in Watt, who explored high school articulation with the Japanese program at Indiana University, Bloomington.

The authors, along with colleagues at Iowa State University (ISU) who have taught German there for over 20 years, have anecdotally perceived a number of issues with high school articulation that, combined with Iowa State’s invigorated commitment to student recruitment in all university programs, have motivated them to generate reliable data about high school articulation with their German program. They have perceived anecdotally that:

- high school instruction continues to play an important role in student motivation and success in the ISU program.

- high school instruction varies widely in quality.
- there is ongoing attrition in high school German programs in Iowa and beyond.
- a large portion of our students who have had high school German instruction come from a small number of high schools with strong German programs.
- an increasing number of students are able to be motivated to study advanced German without having had high school experience with the language.
- personal enjoyment of the language and personal attachment to it remain important for student motivation
- the perception of high-quality teaching and personal engagement with instructors in the German program is important to recruitment and retention in the program.
- clear institutional structures for combining language credentials with other areas of study (through second majors and minors) strongly increase student interest in German and other languages. The ISU program in Languages and Cultures for Professions [<http://www.language.iastate.edu/lcp/>] is the most important form of this institutional initiative.

The authors therefore designed a survey, described below, to enable these perceptions to be explored as hypotheses and research questions. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at ISU (IRB ID no. 08-436), and was administered optionally to all students enrolled in German courses taught in German at the 100-, 200-, and 300-levels in mid-November 2008.

The Iowa State University German Program

The ISU German program offers major (30-credit) and minor (15-credit) concentrations within the Department of World Languages and Cultures (WLC). The department's major programs (German, French, Spanish, and Russian Studies, with minors offered in Chinese Studies and Latin) are currently being reorganized from separate major curricula to language area concentrations as sub-curricula within a single major in World Languages and Cultures. This allows increasing integration of faculty effort across language areas, and a more integrated profile for the department within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the university. The department has no graduate programs. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at ISU (which enrolls approximately 20% of the university's undergraduates) has a language requirement, but a minimal one: students who have not had three or more years in high school must complete two semesters at the university. Other colleges have no language requirement, though the colleges of Engineering and Business collaborate extensively with the Department of World Languages and Cultures through the program in Languages and Cultures for Professions (LCP). The LCP program has offered students in the colleges of Engineering and Business (and likely soon Agriculture) integrated secondary major curricula in World Languages since 2004. Over 100 of the department's 217 majors (2007)¹ across all language concentration areas are now enrolled as secondary majors through the LCP program,

with continued growth likely. The LCP program has proven itself to be a strong recruitment and retention tool, especially in language areas other than Spanish.

Over the past ten years the ISU German program has faced the kinds of transitions that many programs have. These include loss of tenure-line faculty positions and the imperative to rebuild enrollments that had declined in the 1990s. In 2002, when the first author arrived at ISU, there were five full-time tenure-line professors of German in the department (then called Foreign Languages and Literatures; now called World Languages and Cultures). In 2008 there are three, with little prospect of growth given economic and budgetary challenges. The enrollment trends are positive, however. Enrollment in first-year German remains strong, at over 100 students per year, with the expectation that these enrollments will continue given the increasing interest in language training in colleges other than Liberal Arts and Sciences. The College of Engineering has been particularly energetic in promoting language training, especially through the LCP program. In 2002 there were 13 German majors (primary and secondary majors combined) in a total undergraduate body of 22,999. The survey results from November 2008 (which likely undercount due to majors not enrolled in the classes surveyed) indicate 23 German majors in an undergraduate student body of approximately 21,000. Of these 23 majors 17 indicate that German is their secondary major, most of whom are enrolled through the LCP program, meaning that their primary major is in the colleges of Engineering or Business. Growth in German minors has been genuinely dramatic: in 2002 8 minors were enrolled; the survey count (2008) is 39.

High School Programs and Iowa State German

Iowa State University traditionally perceives its student base to be in-state. Iowa is also a relatively small state with low population growth and a slow but ongoing demographic shift from sparsely populated rural areas to a small number of (approximately 10) cities and suburban areas with populations from 50,000 to 250,000 people. The total population of Iowa is slightly less than 3 million (very close to the population of the City of Chicago without its suburbs), with very limited ethnic diversity. In Fall 2007, 76% of ISU undergraduates were Iowa residents. Another 16% hailed from the directly contiguous states of Minnesota, Illinois, Nebraska, and Missouri.

Reliable statistics about high school German programs in Iowa and its contiguous states are difficult to generate. The Iowa Department of Education keeps no systematic list of programs, and neither does the Iowa World Language Association [<http://www.iwla.net/>] or the Iowa chapter of the American Association of Teachers of German (personal communication, Patricia Calkins and Susan Sandholm-Petersen, both 12 October 2008). The authors therefore decided to treat the survey in an exploratory fashion, and see what evidence of the quality and quantity of high school programs could be perceived. Their experiences generally overlap with those reported in Watt and Wehage: high school experience with language study, especially when it reaches the intermediate level and above and is combined with personal or study experience in the language region studied, is a powerful motivator for students. At the same time, it is difficult to correlate high school achievement with post-secondary achievement, and some students clearly have trouble

making the transition independent of their quantity of high school study. Given that the ISU German program uses only a short online placement exam that cannot measure achievement levels systematically, it has been all the more difficult to see relationships between high school and university achievement.

Some personal anecdotal evidence about the state of secondary instruction in German in Iowa provided by Sandholm-Petersen (personal communication, 12 October 2008) is troublesome. Within the past year, one high school German program in a medium-sized city and one middle school German program in one of the state's largest cities were both cut. The program in the medium-sized city was apparently specifically replaced with a program in Chinese, with reported funding assistance from the government of the People's Republic of China. Parents from the middle school German program in the larger city report that upon protesting the cuts, they were told that the principal of the school in question 'wasn't sure that German was a 21st-century language.' The first author is also aware of discussions to cut a large high school German program in another medium-sized city that were prompted by a general sense of budgetary crisis that also saw arts as a target for cuts. At the same time, the general budgetary and policy situation in the state of Iowa is difficult to differentiate from trends in German instruction: at the same middle school that cut German, Spanish was also cut from the curriculum. Nonetheless it appears that German programs can be an easy target for cuts if they are not highly successful – and the current economic trends in Iowa and across the US are hardly auspicious.

The Survey Instrument

The survey was designed largely to measure both quantitatively and qualitatively students' experience with high school German and their perception of the relationship of their high school experience to their university experience. No attempt to correlate achievement levels was made. On 10 November 2008, just before the survey was administered, 216 students were officially enrolled in the 10 courses or sections surveyed. 179 completed surveys were returned and evaluated. The survey was optional, some students drop in the final weeks of the term, and a few students were enrolled in multiple courses but told in the survey instructions not to fill out multiple surveys, meaning that the completion rate of 83% represents a minimum. The survey information and questions were precisely as follows, though the format allowed students to circle yes or no responses and left room for written qualitative answers:

Information and Consent:

- This survey is optional, and not required for participation in this class. Your participation will in no way affect your class performance or grade.
- You must be at least 18 years old to complete this survey.
- All responses will remain anonymous. Please do not put your name on the survey.

- Surveys will be securely stored by Professor Kevin Amidon of the Iowa State University German program for a period of three years, and then destroyed.
- You may skip any question on the survey.
- This study has been evaluated by the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board.

Please circle your response, or give a short written answer.

1. Which German class (course number) are you enrolled in?
2. How many German classes have you had at Iowa State University (approx. ok)?
3. Are you majoring in German?
 - a. If so, is German a second major for you (for example German LCP)?
4. Are you minoring in German?
5. If you are not currently majoring or minoring in German, are you considering doing so?
6. Have you previously studied abroad in a German-speaking country as part of your Iowa State experience?
7. Have you participated in an internship in a German-speaking country as part of your Iowa State experience?
8. How satisfied are you with the German program at Iowa State University? Please consider all classes and experiences you have had as part of the program.

1	2	3	4	5
very dissatisfied		neutral		very satisfied
9. Did you study German in high school?
10. If you studied German in high school, please answer the following questions:
 - a. For how many years did you study German in high school?
 - b. Where did you attend high school (*optional*)?
 - c. Did you visit a German-speaking country as part of your high school German experience?
 - d. Why did you choose to study German at Iowa State after having had it in high school?
 - e. How well do you believe that your high school experience prepared you for German study at Iowa State?

1	2	3	4	5
very poorly		neutral		very well

f. How satisfied are you with your high school German experience? Please consider all German classes and experiences at your high school(s).

1 2 3 4 5
very dissatisfied neutral very satisfied

g. Please note any particular strengths or weaknesses of your high school preparation for German study at Iowa State.

11. Regardless of whether you studied German in high school, why did you choose to study German at Iowa State University?
12. If you have had more than one German class at Iowa State (or German at another college or university previously), why did you choose to continue with German after your first class?
13. If you have not already done so, do you intend to study abroad or participate in an internship in a German-speaking country?
14. How could Iowa State better help students to make the transition from high school to university German programs?
15. What other suggestions do you have for the German program at Iowa State?

Results

The survey results were divided into quantitative and qualitative portions. The quantitative portion represents students' enrollment records and perceptions of satisfaction. The qualitative portion included questions about students' motivations, which were interpreted in categories that enabled quantitative reports.

General quantitative results on enrollment:

Reported German majors	23
Secondary majors (of 23 majors)	17
Percent secondary majors	74%
Reported German minors	39
Non-major/-minor considering	44

Majors with no high school	4
Percent	17%
Minors with no high school	13
Percent	33%
Considering with no high school	24
Percent	55%

Percent 1 st yr with any high school	10%
Percent 2 nd yr with any high school	77%
Percent 3 rd yr with any high school	80%
Percent 2 nd & 3 rd year with major	25%
Percent 2 nd & 3 rd with minor	43%
Percent 2 nd & 3 rd considering	23%
Total % (2 nd & 3 rd yr)	91%

3rd yr with major or minor	45
Percent (of 3 rd year students)	80%
3rd yr considering	10
Total maj+min+consid (3 rd yr)	55
Percent (of 3 rd yr students)	98%

Statistical results on student satisfaction:

Mean satisfaction of students with ISU program (1=very dissatisfied; 5=very satisfied):

All students surveyed (N=179)	4.24
Standard deviation	0.74
First year students (N=92)	4.28
Second year students (N=31)	4.20
Third year students (N=56)	4.19
Second and third year students	4.19
German majors (N=23)	4.35

Mean satisfaction with high school program (1=very dissatisfied; 5=very satisfied):

All students with high school experience (N=78)	4.12
Standard deviation	1.06
First year students (N=9)	3.44
Second year students (N=24)	4.25
Third year students (N=45)	4.18
Second and third year students	4.20
German majors (N=23)	4.32

Mean perception of high school preparation for ISU (1=very poorly; 5=very well):

All students with high school experience (N=78)	3.78
Standard deviation	1.11
First year students (N=9)	2.44
Second year students (N=24)	3.88
Third year students (N=45)	4.00
Second and third year students	3.96
German majors (N=23)	3.89

Data on high schools reported:

<i>High school state and number of reports</i>	<i>Number of students</i>	<i>Percentage of all reports</i>
Iowa – 6 high schools with multiple reports	26	35%
Iowa – 11 high schools with single reports	11	15%
Minnesota – 10 high schools	13	18%
High schools outside Iowa and Minnesota (at least 8 states reported)	14	19%
Unclear or unreported	10	14%
<i>Min. 49 high schools</i>	<i>74 students</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>

Average years of high school German study for those reporting any high school:

100-level students (N=9)	1.1
200-level students (N=24)	3.6
300-level students (N=45)	3.9

Qualitative results about reasons for choosing and continuing with German study (percentage of students reporting these situations in questions 10d, 10g, and 11 through 15 of the survey):

Enjoying German	73%
Intention to study abroad or intern in a German-speaking country	50%
Meeting college language requirement	18%
Percent of these in 1 st year	82%
Family or personal ties to German	14%
Good teaching	14%
Would like to work, study, live, or travel in a German-speaking country	11%
Improved career prospects	5%
Wanted a third language	4%
Spanish was not available	2%

Discussion

The results of the survey are, as expected, ambiguous, intriguing, and encouraging at once. The narrow range of variance in the quantitative data (student reports of satisfaction) means that little would be gained from extensive statistical analysis of variance and significance. Tests of correlation (for example between satisfaction with high school programs and satisfaction with ISU) were therefore not carried out. Nonetheless some clear interpretations are possible, and those interpretations can be the basis both for further research and for suggestions about improvements to the German program to improve student perceptions and (possibly) outcomes.

The most immediately significant result for student recruitment and retention in the program is in a new level of awareness about the high school programs from which students have come. As the authors expected, a very significant percentage of their students with high school experience come from a very small number of high schools. Indeed, with 35% of all students with high school experience coming from only six high schools in Iowa, it is clearly crucial to maintain and expand relationships with these programs. The authors were pleased to see that eleven more Iowa high schools have programs that sent them single students. They do know, unfortunately, that one of these programs is the one that was recently closed down in a medium-sized city. These smaller programs should be made the focus of new and energetic recruiting efforts – efforts which themselves may help strengthen the support that these programs have in their own communities. The authors were also aware that Minnesota high schools sent them students with fine preparation, but they were impressed to find that 18% of their students are from Minnesota. Initial contact with these programs and others should be established. Where strong high school German programs in other neighboring states (especially Illinois, Missouri, and Nebraska) can be identified, they too should be contacted.

The quantitative data about the ISU German program itself are highly encouraging. The authors had hoped to find that their major and minor programs could speak to students who have no high school preparation in German, and indeed they do, with 17% of majors and 33% of minors reporting no high school German training. Recruiting efforts in first- and second-year German, along with the maintenance of a strong teaching program at the first- and second-year levels, must remain priorities. Particularly since 55% of those considering a German major or minor (a number nearly equal to those reporting a major) have no high school experience, it should be emphasized that while the program is challenging for students who have no high school German experience, it is clearly achievable, and many students surmount the challenge. At the same time, very large majorities of students at the second- and third-year levels do arrive with substantial high school experience (averaging 3.6 and 3.9 years respectively). It is also encouraging that so few students with high-school experience are in the first-year program.

Furthermore, the ISU German program's internal recruitment and retention efforts appear to be bearing fruit. Second- and third-year students together report having taken an average of 3.1 German courses. For third-year students alone this figure is 3.9 courses. A particularly encouraging statistic is that third-year students appear highly receptive to declaring a major or minor in German: 80% report already having done so – and the remainder, with the exception of one single student, report that they are considering doing so. The results about students' internship and study abroad experiences point to potential for strengthening the program. Only 11 students (at all levels) report having had such experience, yet 50% report the intention to do so. Students should have options and possibilities for study abroad and internship made clear to them at an early stage of the program.

Reports about levels of student satisfaction are also heartening, though not simple to interpret. Average levels of student satisfaction with the ISU German program are closely bunched at all levels around 4.2 (slightly above "Satisfied"). Reports of high school satisfaction do have sub-

stantially higher variance, though for second- and third-year students they are, on average, effectively equivalent to reports of satisfaction with the ISU program. Unsurprisingly, first year students with high school preparation appear, on average, to be disappointed with it. It is also interesting that German majors report noticeably higher satisfaction with both the ISU program and their high school programs. This indicates that recruitment efforts with particularly strong high school programs should be particularly successful.

Qualitative results are interesting as well. Students appear to be closely attuned to the pleasurable personal aspects of learning a world language. Given the importance the ISU program places on professional preparation and communication, it is curious that so few students seem to see learning German as an important aspect in their career preparation and prospects. The program can now generate a number of strong personal testimonials from recent graduates (especially but not exclusively those who participated in the LCP program) whose young careers have benefited from their German training, and these students can perhaps be engaged. This apparently low engagement with professional prospects can perhaps best be interpreted (unsurprisingly) as a general indicator of a short time horizon in students' future planning. After all, 50% report the desire or intention to study abroad or intern in a German-speaking country, an experience that has a shorter time horizon than does career planning. This indicates further that international off-campus experience can be a threshold to greater engagement with both the program itself and longer-term personal and professional planning. The program should promote and expand the available international off-campus experiences, and highlight them in its recruitment and retention efforts. The relatively low prevalence (at only 14%) of family or personal links to German-speaking countries perhaps indicates that it is the strength of the programs themselves (at both the high school and university levels) that attracts and motivates students.

Conclusions

The results of this survey of one German program and its students' high school experiences cannot be easily generalized. They are also cause for neither celebration nor alarm. Nonetheless the authors' hypotheses appear to have been largely confirmed, and conclusions can be drawn about actions that can be undertaken to strengthen the program — conclusions that point to efficient ways to use faculty time in recruitment and retention. Students can be motivated successfully to study German even when they have not had high school experience – yet strong high school experience is a powerful motivator. The loss of weaker high school programs in a state like Iowa likely also has relatively little effect on the strength of the university program. The loss of a very few strong programs, however, would deal the program a major blow. The German program must therefore not neglect to keep apprised of the health of the high school programs with which it has traditional links, and it should encourage the development of further links, particularly to strong programs that can deliver multiple students — a strategy that can likely produce gains in enrollment of highly motivated students with minimum time and resource investment by faculty and staff. Though the survey did not ask whether the ISU German program made any difference in stu-

dents' general decisions to attend ISU, peer word-of-mouth can certainly be a powerful motivator. The program should also learn more about how study abroad and internships figure in students' motivations, and in their time horizons for educational and career planning. Internal recruiting and retention efforts should focus on both high-school trained and non-high-school trained cohorts, and should be tailored carefully to appeal to both. Finally, the program should – in ways that engage both personal and intellectual elements – continue to offer strong teaching that shows students the pleasures to be had from learning, communicating, and reading about the contemporary and historical words and worlds of other cultures.

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, general statistics about Iowa State University and the Department of World Languages and Cultures are derived either from the Office of Institutional Research [<http://www.ir.iastate.edu/>] or from statistics maintained by Elizabeth Rectanus, Student Advisor in the Department of World Languages and Cultures.