

STAND UP FOR FRENCH: NOW IS THE TIME

The language community has been talking about promotion and advocacy for years now. The AATF has had first a Task Force, then a Commission for the Promotion of French, since 1994. Promotion, public relations, publicity were among the reasons that we launched National French Week in 1999. It is crucially important for recruitment for French to be talked about positively in the school and community. Students are drawn to elective courses where fun, innovative things are happening, where they can actually use the language, and where their love of technology is acknowledged. This does not mean the course has to be easy. It has to be “worth” it. The Facebook generation loves communicating with their circle of “friends.” When these include their peers in a French-speaking culture, they are even more motivated to learn to use the language.

However, attracting students is not sufficient if you have unsupportive or indifferent administrators, at any level. Therefore, each of us needs to advocate for the study of French. Advocacy means educating and informing decision-makers before they need to make a decision. It means finding or creating allies who will support French. At K-12 levels, principals, counselors, superintendents should be aware of all the accomplishments of French students. If they participate in contests, travel abroad, have keypals, tutor younger students, volunteer, raise money for Haiti, get any sort of recognition related to their study of French, this should be communicated in a press release, a class newsletter, newspaper clippings, etc. These administrators should be invited to awards ceremonies, events organized by the French Club or *Société Honoraire de Français*, in-school competitions where they can serve as judges (or tasters), anywhere they can see what is going on.

Participating in local, state, or national competitions, organizing an exchange with a school in a French-speaking country, putting together a class newsletter in both languages, tutoring or teaching micro-units in feeder schools, bringing in guest speakers or dignitaries, celebrating National French Week, the *Semaine de la Francophonie*, or *Mardi gras*, collaborating with teachers of other languages or disciplines—the list of potential projects is almost endless. While the actual project itself can be

pedagogical and promotional in nature, making sure decision-makers participate or are aware is advocacy. Students doing research and preparing presentations on the French-speaking world and its economic and political impact is pedagogical for them. Using their work to inform administrators is advocating for the importance of the study of French.

At the post-secondary level, department chairs and deans, provosts and presidents need to be kept apprised of French-related activities. Don't forget the campus publications office. They love human interest stories and photo ops. Organizing events, using the French Club or Pi Delta Phi, recommending students for French awards and scholarships, bringing in guest lecturers, and especially collaborating with colleagues in other departments are ways to make French visible on campus. Keep track of former students to learn what they are doing with their language skills. Invite them back to campus to speak to current students, and be sure that administrators are there. Art and music departments frequently have faculty members who are specialists in some area of French art or music. The same is true of History and Comparative Literature, not to mention Business and International Relations. Work with these departments to bring in guest speakers that appeal to a broad range of interests and make sure their French connection is highlighted.

There are literally thousands of innovative ideas that have been used successfully by colleagues across the country at all levels. Vigilance is key, and not missing any opportunity to create a positive image of French, to show that French is more than just France, to provide factual information about the economic importance of French-speaking countries in the state, and to show what students are learning and doing with the language, both during their studies and upon graduation.

Many AATF members are alone in their school or district or in very small departments. Cultivate your Francophone and Francophile colleagues so that you are not alone when a crisis strikes. Administrators looking to cut small (“underperforming”) programs are less likely to target French when they know others will stand up for the program and when the teacher and students have been regularly featured in the news, both on and off campus. Active

teachers and students are more likely to become activists in a crunch.

Parents and alumni can be important partners in the promotion of French. Schools (even high schools) have learned to keep in touch with their alumni because it is good PR to talk about the more successful students, and they can be potential donors. If you don't already have a class or departmental newsletter (electronic or paper), create one now. Students often have creative ideas for content and layout, and the teacher may only need to provide oversight.

Consult the AATF Advocacy Depot [www.utm.edu/staff/globeg/advofr.shtml] and Advocacy Wiki [<https://frenchadvocacy.wikispaces.com/>] for documents and ideas. If your state does not yet have a “Why We Need French” page (see Advocacy Depot list), contact Tennessee Bob [bobp@utm.edu] to see about creating one.

Here are some steps you can take immediately. (1) Create that newsletter. (2) Plan at least four events or classroom activities during the school year to which you can invite administrators. (3) Find at least one Francophone/Francophile colleague and work on a collaborative project this year. (4) Bring in at least one guest speaker who will talk to French classes and other students about some aspect of the French-speaking world. If you don't have funds to pay for a performer, perhaps you can find a faculty member at a nearby university, a Francophone in your community, or a veteran who might be willing to come and talk without great cost. (5) Make sure your students compete for and are recognized for at least one award this year (don't forget the AATF Outstanding Senior in French Award—see page 27). (6) If you don't already have an exchange program, make a commitment to pursue the idea so that one can be implemented next year.

Advocating after a crisis has arisen often appears more self-serving, trying to preserve one's job, and the arguments may not be taken as seriously. Advocating for French ahead of time lays the groundwork to avoid a crisis altogether, create allies in the event one can't be avoided, and educates the public that will be involved, if not in decision-making itself, then in supporting a program.

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