*Language PLUS*

*Language Education Accreditation Program*

In the fall of 2015, representatives of approximately 50 language programs and institutions met at the University of Texas Austin to discuss the possibility of creating a system to accredit language programs in higher education. The consensus after the 2-day meeting was that the language profession was poised to take on this challenge, having invested significantly in standards and certification of individual language abilities and teacher qualifications, as well as in program reviews and collaboration with colleges of education. The virtually unanimous decision was taken at the end of this meeting to go forward under the name of *Partners for Languages in the U.S.* (PLUS), with headquarters at the University of Texas at Austin. Since 2015, the leadership and supporters of PLUS have spent considerable time and effort in exploring the concept of language program accreditation, its design and feasibility. A draft version of the standards for language program accreditation has been produced, modeled on the work of the highly successful accreditation organization for engineering: the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). While outputs are a critical component, the final standards adopted by PLUS cover faculty qualifications, institutional support, facilities, overseas immersion…all the factors that are critical to a successful language program. [The PLUS Standards are available for review.]

As a result of these efforts, the decision has now been taken to launch a feasibility pilot following the model of ABET. The ABET accreditation model invests in the authority and leadership of the experts in the field. Member organizations, like the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, represent their profession in determining standards in their fields. Our decision to propose the ABET model reflects our conviction that the AATs represent our experts and should play the major role in the formation and implementation of the accreditation process.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

With funding originally provided to PLUS by major university language programs, the first phase of our feasibility pilot will be the recruitment as societal members of a number of national language teachers associations. Following the ABET model, representatives of these member organizations will constitute a Governing Board, with a rotating chair elected every two years. These member associations will also constitute language-specific Commissions, the principal obligation of which is the conduct of the self-studies and site visitations in preparation for the accreditation application to the Governing Board. The Governing Board oversees the Commissions, sets the generic standards of accreditation and protocols for peer review (to guarantee uniformity across language fields), and is responsible for the final accreditation decisions. The language-specific commissions are responsible for adapting the generic accreditation to language-specific requirements, designating the commission’s representative to the Governing Board, and selecting and training the site visitation teams of volunteers from the association’s membership. (In addition to the specific language experts, where possible the site visitation team will include outside experts in accreditation, business and government. This is to ensure our graduates are ready for employment.)

Beginning with an effective and efficient standardized peer review program, the initiative will be extended to accreditation. Once the accreditation process is proven, the next logical step is an application to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) to be a recognized accrediting organization.

To review:

Feasibility Phase:

* Solicitation of national language association members;
* Appointment of accreditation Commissions by the association members;
* The constitution of a Governing Board;
* The Governing Board’s review and approval of the generic accreditation standards;
* The development of protocol for training program reviewers and their conduct of the peer review process.

Functioning Phase:

* Language programs seeking accreditation apply to the Governing Board;
* The Governing Board refers the request to the relevant language-specific Commission;
* The Commission provides the applicant with a ‘self-study’ protocol.
* The applying program conducts the self-study and submits its results to the Commission;
* The Commission evaluates the self-study and accepts or delays the application, with adequate formative feedback to delayed applications;
* The Commission appoints a peer review team of experts;
* The review team visits the campus and assesses the program against the standards;
* The review team reports the results of the campus review and recommends to the Commission acceptance or continuation of the program’s application;
* The Commission evaluates the positive review recommendation and endorses or not the recommendation;
* The Commission forwards the positive recommendations with all supporting evidence to the Governing Board for final approval;
* The Governing Board approves and publishes the decision profession wide.

**MEMBERSHIP**

Membership is open to professional language associations, with candidate and accredited institutional language programs advising and providing feedback to the Commissions and Governing Board. Any program at a U.S. institution of higher education, both two- and four-year, is eligible to apply for accreditation.

FUNDING

This organizational phase will be supported by existing funds, but the self-sustaining business plan calls for income from membership dues, institutional fees assessed in the accreditation process, as well as from training seminars and conferences devoted to self-studies, outside peer reviews, and the accreditation process. Membership dues will be based on the associations’ membership.

**RATIONALE**

In a time when colleges and universities are being held to a higher level of scrutiny and relevance, accreditation remains the ultimate assurance of quality and responsiveness in a profession. While many technical professions have accreditation, certification and licensure systems, the so-called “soft science” disciplines are hampered in this effort for lack of agreed-upon standards and assessment of student output. The language profession, however, has spent decades engaged with standards as well as assessment and testing of learners and is in a position to take on the natural culmination of these efforts: a rigorous peer review process and ultimately, if successful, a professional accreditation of its programs. This initiative will test the leadership of the profession, as peer review, let alone accreditation, requires a level of professionalism, trust and transparency that is unprecedented. The language profession is capable of taking this next step in its long history of standards and assessment, but it needs a profession-wide mechanism.

**STANDARDS**

The proposed accreditation model, that of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), is well established and proven to be effective, efficient and fiscally viable. The definition of successful programs advocated here has been captured by a set of standards guided by the following principles:

* Ambition:
  + Clear and ambitious program goals;
  + Commitment of campus leadership to strategic plans and resourcing in support of these goals;
  + Involvement of private industry early in the discussion on desired applied language outcomes.
* Accountability:
  + “Learning outcomes” as well as “teaching inputs”;
  + Direct involvement of faculty and staff in program evaluation and continuous quality improvement;
  + Rigorous assessment of language proficiency student outcomes according to national standards;
  + Validation through peer review and program evaluation that outcomes are responsive to “consumer” needs in the private and public sectors.
* Accessibility
  + Equal access to learners from all disciplines across the campus
  + Interdisciplinary programming & “language across the curriculum”
* Quality:
  + Best practices in language, culture and international education;
  + Professionalized faculty;
  + Latest science and technologies in support of language programming;
  + Rigorous overseas study and practical in-country experience and internships as an integral program component;
  + Relevant language instruction designed to support students’ areas of study and career goals in an intercultural work environment.

A draft set of standards developed by leading professionals in the field of language education are attached.

**BENEFITS TO STUDENTS, DEPARTMENTS, INSTITUTIONS & THE FIELF**

Meeting the target of high quality professional practice entails more than just teaching the language. A program must marry disciplinary or technical skills to linguistic as well as cultural skills, the combination of which defines and differentiates a professional qualified to operate across cultural and global boundaries. Students who graduate from programs that are recognized by their peers as meeting accreditation standards have enhanced opportunities in employment, post-graduate professional education and global mobility.

The ultimate goal is the implementation of a peer-driven process of accreditation, from standards setting to program review and development, ultimately culminating in accreditation. Programs and institutions that subscribe to these standards and process will be formally recognized nationally and on campus as among the nation’s best performing language programs.

**CONCLUSION**

PLUS is now soliciting language teachers’ associations to join this program accreditation effort. The language teachers associations, mirroring the ABET engineering societies, will constitute a national alliance of professional societies willing to take on the unprecedented task of peer review, and ultimately accreditation, of its members’ programs. (In the startup mode, in a modification of the ABET model, a set of founding institutional members of PLUS will provide the beta sites for the accreditation process, providing guidance and feedback to the associations and to PLUS leadership.)

At this stage, PLUS operations have been turned over to the American Councils Research Center with the task of taking PLUS to the next stage. Once a founding set of AATs are identified, they will establish a national board, headquarters and executive director.

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