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Academics Talk With Government Representatives About Creating a National Language Policy

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Washington

A professor of German took one more step in bringing experts together to work on developing a national language policy on Wednesday.

An invitation-only conference held at Georgetown University here drew representatives from academe, the federal government, and nongovernmental agencies who share concerns that the country needs to improve its linguistic resources.

The meeting was the fruit of a nearly yearlong effort by Heidi Byrnes, a German professor at Georgetown and editor of the Perspectives column in *The Modern Language Journal*.

The conference accomplished more than what participants agreed was a much-needed dialogue about how the country can build its linguistic competencies to meet its military, intelligence, diplomatic, and economic needs. It also resulted in the formation of a panel that has been charged with developing a national foreign-language-policy platform and creating a roundtable at the National Academies to discuss foreign-language policy.

"Recent societal and sociopolitical developments and specific decisions on the part of various governmental agencies have laid bare the fact that the foreign-language field ... has very little voice in developing and implementing a comprehensive strategic plan necessary to create a language and area-studies-competent citizen for the 21st century," said Ms. Byrnes.

Ms. Byrnes handpicked the 40 attendees at the conference—which included leaders of the professional disciplinary associations, representatives of the Departments of Defense, Education, and State, and other language and linguistics professionals—and asked them to consider what governmental policies and structures might be needed to improve foreign-language competency in the United States.

Wednesday's conference was the culmination of a series of panels moderated by Ms. Byrnes at recent national conferences, including those of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the Modern Language Association, and the American Association for Applied Linguistics. Although those who attended Wednesday's conference have similar work and goals, said Ms. Byrnes, it was the first time many of those individuals had sat in a room together.

One of the participants, Lyle F. Bachman, professor and chair of applied linguistics at the University of California at Los Angeles, said he could feel the enthusiasm on Wednesday. "Different groups are talking to each other, and they don't always talk together even though they're all in the business of promoting modern language."

Sputnik for Languages

The economic pressures of globalization and the Bush administration's emphasis on "national-security languages" after September 11, 2001, have both proven to be strong impetuses for heightened interest in foreign languages. Ms. Byrnes and her colleagues hope that, by gaining advocates within government, foreign languages might take a place of national prominence in education the way science and technology did in the post-Sputnik era.

"If we talk about a Sputnik moment, we should also talk about the kind of resources the Sputnik moment got," said Ms. Byrnes. "Fifty years later, in an era of migration, multiculturalism, and globalization, a similar argument might be made for preparing a citizenry" with language and multicultural skills, she said.

The conference also builds on momentum created by recent reports and studies of foreign-language training in the United States which have surveyed problems and proposed solutions. A March 2007 report by the National Research Council of the National Academies, for instance, recommended the creation of a high-level position at the Department of Education to oversee foreign-language education. The Modern Language Association's 2007 report on foreign languages focused on the need to restructure university language departments to better integrate language learning across the curriculum. And an earlier 2006 study by the Council for Economic Development emphasized the importance of foreign language education in preparing a globally competitive work force.

Following a general discussion, attendees at Wednesday's conference broke into small groups to imagine what a national foreign-language and international-studies curriculum might look like, how to engage a national discussion about the importance of language education, what role academics should have in leading that discussion, and which other constituencies might be tapped for support and funds.

Ms. Byrnes has solicited essays on those topics from members of the group to be published in the December 2008 issue of *The Modern Language Journal*.

Panel Created

The meeting ended with the creation of a committee made up of representatives of several professional associations that would highlight the concerns of academics involved in foreign-language and international education to political and business leaders, and help adopt some of the ideas discussed at the conference.

The seven-person committee will include representatives from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the American Association of Teachers of German, the Modern Language Association, the National Foreign Language Center, the Center for Applied Linguistics, and the Interagency Language Roundtable. Mr. Bachman, of UCLA, was also named to the committee. The group will identify resources to create a roundtable discussion on foreign language policy at the National Academies before a new U.S. president is inaugurated in 2009.

The conference's attendees represented a spectrum of interests, and many appeared hopeful that the conversation at Georgetown might spur other discussions on larger, more-public platforms, including the National Academies.

"We've had a yearlong moveable feast of a national summit," said Rosemary G. Feal, executive director of the Modern Language Association, of Ms. Byrnes's efforts. "Only a maverick like Heidi could have pulled it off. If any association had tried it, it would have been branded. We need to have a regular national-language summit so that we can air these issues in a politically neutral environment."

Another attendee said that the issue of language education should be kept on lawmakers' minds. "I think it's also very important to figure out how to attach this to the rest of the education conversation," said Stuart W. Elliott, director of the National Academies' Board on Testing and Assessment at the Center for Education. "People are going to be figuring out what to do with the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. Lots of things are being attached to that conversation. If this is going to be part of the conception of what K-12 is all about, and what the federal role and national conversation should be about K-12 education, this has got to be a part of it."