



The Current State of Teaching Czech at Canadian and American Universities

SOUČASNÝ STAV VÝUKY ČESKÉHO JAZYKA NA KANADSKÝCH A AMERICKÝCH UNIVERZITÁCH

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ABSTRAKT:

Tento článek se zabývá výukou českého jazyka na kanadských a amerických univerzitách se zaměřením na rozdíly v metodologii, počet studentů a podporu institucí. Zatímco evropské programy často vycházejí z centrálně předepsaných osnov, severoamerická výuka uplatňuje „otevřený přístup“, vytvářený jednotlivými vyučujícími a potřebami studentů. Údaje o nízkém počtu studentů ukazují na nestabilní postavení bohemistiky. Článek také rozlišuje mezi vyučujícími, kteří k výuce češtiny přistupují jako k vědeckému poslání, a těmi, kteří ji přijímají z nutnosti zaměstnání, což má důsledky pro pokračování programů. Navzdory omezeným zdrojům a nedostatku profesionálního uznání čeština nadále přitahuje oddanou skupinu studentů se zájmem o jazyk, literaturu, film a kulturní studia, čímž udržuje svou přítomnost ve vysokoškolském vzdělávání v Severní Americe.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

výukové přístupy, nedostatek studentů, motivační faktory, zvolené poslání vs. zvolené zaměstnání, požadavek na znalost cizího jazyka, přednášky o české kultuře, počet řádných studentů, Harvard a Columbia, Yale, University of Toronto, program přežití, podpora univerzitních institucí

ABSTRACT:

This article examines Czech language instruction at Canadian and American universities, focusing on differences in methodology, enrollment trends, and institutional support. While European programs often follow centrally prescribed curricula, North American courses adopt an open approach, shaped by individual instructors and student needs. Enrollment data reveal the precarious position of Czech studies, with classes frequently limited to only a handful of students. The article also distinguishes between instructors who approach Czech teaching as a scholarly vocation and those who accept it out of employment necessity, with implications for program sustainability. Despite limited resources and professional recognition, Czech continues to attract a dedicated cohort of students interested in language, literature, film, and cultural studies, thereby sustaining its presence in North American higher education.

KEYWORDS:

Teaching approaches, Enrollment decline, Motivation factors, Chosen vocation vs. Chosen employment, Foreign language requirement, Cultural courses, Student enrollments, Harvard, Columbia, Yale, University of Toronto, Program survival, Institutional support

INTRODUCTION

This article adopts a descriptive and comparative case study-approach, focusing on recent academic years. Enrollment figures were collected from publicly available

university statistics,¹ supplemented by personal inquiries with faculty and from departmental announcements. In some years, institutions publish enrollment figures for specific courses; for instance, in the past the *Modern Language Association* published enrollment numbers for individual languages.

Approaches to teaching the Czech language differ from one university to another. Unlike European curricula — often dictated by ministries of education — higher education institutions in Canada and the United States use an “open approach,” shaped by university guidelines, individual teachers, and students. Although teaching approaches in the two countries are broadly similar, differences emerge at the level of individual instructors. This study is intended as a springboard for further research.

THE STATE OF CZECH STUDIES IN CANADA

In Canada, Czech is taught only at the University of Toronto, the most prominent public institution within the Canadian higher education system. According to *US News and World Report*,² the University of Toronto (commonly known as U of T and ranked first in Canada), secured sixteenth place in the 2024–5 ranking of best global universities, tying with two American private Ivy League universities, Princeton and Cornell, in addition to the public University of California, San Francisco. U of T’s prominent position is due to many factors, including its professors’ scientific contributions, but certainly not due to research in small fields such as Czech Studies. The Czech and Slovak program was only recently reintroduced after a hiatus following the departure of its last tenured professor of Czech literature, Veronika Ambros.

During 2018–2024, the interim instructor, a non-native Czech speaker with a degree in language and linguistics from Charles University, introduced a teaching methodology based on Lída Holá’s *New Czech Step by Step* (Prague: Akropolis, 2004) and supplementary reading sources such as *Staré pověsti české a moravské* in Holá’s adaptation. Cultural courses taught in English focused on the accomplishments of Canadians of Czech and Slovak origin and on highlights of Czech and Moravian culture. These courses attracted students in single digits, some of Czech ancestry.

The current instructor — the author of this study, who was offered the University of Toronto position in Czech and Slovak studies in Fall 2024 — has increased student interest by introducing a dynamic approach to language teaching, literature, and film, drawing on her teaching experience at Harvard and Yale over the past four

1 Enrollment statistics are accessible to university employees, faculty members, affiliated researchers, et al. One can also contact directly the registrar office of each university to obtain the statistics for research purposes. The author of this study has been affiliated with several institutions in the United States and Canada and thus obtained access to the above statistics.

2 <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/rankings>. This survey places Prague’s Charles University at 242nd position (close to the University of Vienna); however, it does not necessarily reflect quality of instruction.



decades. For each class, she writes Czech language materials tailored exclusively to her students' learning needs and development. In her literature and film courses taught in English, she introduces globally recognized Czech and Slovak novelists, thinkers, philosophers, dramatists, and film directors, placing them within the broader context of European heritage. Students are assigned substantial reading and are expected to participate actively in class discussion, in addition to writing short papers for each class and term essays. Class sizes now reach double digits and attract a large group of regular U of T undergraduates of foreign origin, especially from Asian countries and Central European states. Despite these efforts and encouraging results, the program remains in a state of uncertainty. The Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures Chair is attempting to sustain and reinvigorate the field of Czech by attracting students to minor in Czech (the first student has just joined) as a subfield to their major undergraduate program. For several decades, however, no graduate program in Czech studies has been available to students at the University of Toronto or elsewhere in Canada.

If there is a notable difference between Czech programs in Canada and the United States, it lies in the absence of a foreign language requirement at Canadian universities. Yet, students at the University of Toronto demonstrate remarkable interest and commitment to Czech language — especially in literature and film. Their progress in language acquisition has been rapid: they are able to read and summarize complex texts after only a short period of study. To strengthen their speaking skills, they actively participate in Czech community cultural events and engage in conversation with Czech students at the university, some of whom are enrolled in science programs but enjoy an everyday conversation in their native tongue with peer learners of Czech.

THE STATUS OF US UNIVERSITIES

The distinct difference between top Canadian and North American universities — particularly the ones known for their excellence — lies less in educational acquisition and more in the perception of social status. America's top colleges and universities are worlds of their own: highly competitive, imbued with an aura of prestige and success, and marked by networks that may lead to lifelong friendships, prominent careers, high-paying positions, elevated social status, and residence in the most desirable neighborhoods. Despite ongoing democratization efforts, these universities — especially the eight East Coast Ivy League schools — continue to foster intellectual, societal, cultural, and economic elitism. Within this context, one can easily deduce that Czech — as a field of study — carries little aura of prestige or promise of future success in North American society.³ There are known cases of parents dis-

³ As pointed out in previous writings by the author of this contribution, the general publicity and the press for President Trump do not mention that his three adult children are half-Czechs. Upon discovering this information, students enrolled in Czech are often surprised, admitting they had no idea.

couraging their children from studying “useless” subjects, such as “minor (or small)” languages, Czech included—and, in some cases, opposing language study altogether. Since undergraduate education in North America is not highly specialized — in contrast to European education or to North American graduate education, such as Law and Medicine — students can select from a wide range of elective courses each semester. To graduate with a B.A. or B.S. — the first level of a university degree — they are required to complete 32 to 36 courses over the four-year undergraduate program. This structure provides flexibility to explore unusual subjects, such as Czech. However, despite this freedom, genuine motivation is often lacking.



THE STATE OF CZECH STUDIES AT US UNIVERSITIES

Like the program in Canada, most undergraduate colleges in North America supplement their language instruction with cultural curricula — namely literature, film, history, and politics. These courses are offered in English, with the aim not only of giving students far-reaching knowledge within the field but also of encouraging them to enroll in language study. Logically, this correlation makes sense — yet it remains a tricky proposition. Roughly estimated, only one out of 20 to 25 students enrolled in cultural courses of Central and Eastern Europe, might register for Czech, whether out of necessity or genuine interest. Students who participate in summer programs in Prague and other Czech and Moravian cities, show a higher tendency to continue with the language, or to restart from the beginning at their home institution. Sometimes they are simply driven by the prospect of an easy credit or the appeal of a small class; at other times they might be motivated by the desire to visit the country in the future, if not to conduct business in the Czech Republic after graduation. Regardless of motivation, the study of Czech in North America remains non-conformist and is often viewed by the public as a curiosity or oddity — though less so in Canada, a country where some 200 languages, including indigenous ones, are spoken — than in the United States.

MOTIVATION TO STUDY CZECH IN THE AGE OF AI

Today, relying on cultural background and ethnicity is largely a past endeavor. With successive waves of immigration to North America, Czech language flourished in the late 1960s and late 1980s (clearly for different reasons: first following the invasion of Czechoslovakia and, twenty years later, following the collapse of the Eastern European communist bloc). While the older generation of Czech émigrés still hold onto the fame of the past — Baťa’s shoe industry, T. G. Masaryk’s role in the First Czechoslovak Republic, Václav Havel’s leadership in the Velvet Revolution and presidency of the Czech Republic, or the global success of tennis champions like Ivan Lendl and Martina Navrátilová — the younger generation has moved on and now is elsewhere.

By today’s standards, the above historical references rarely impress twenty-year-old Canadian and US university students, let alone to propel them to embark on the



study of Czech. Their reality is the era of Artificial Intelligence. Free AI applications can deliver a vast range of historical facts in seconds — complete with reasoning, analysis of causes and consequences, and polished style and orthography — in whatever language of their desire, be it Japanese, Tamil, Spanish, French, Chinese, or Czech.⁴

The University of Toronto emeritus professor Geoffrey Hinton — a computer scientist and cognitive psychologist educated at the University of Cambridge and at the University of Edinburgh, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 2023 — was one of the contributors to the existence of AI. Hinton has warned us that AI's rapid development may ultimately lead to the destruction of human race. However, we are already familiar with that warning through Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.* And it is specifically through this intersection that teachers may find a path to attract students to study Czech: by combining scientific fantasy and literature with the latest digital tools. Such an approach appeals to curiosity, motivating students to read the play in the original and learn more about a visionary writer who predicted the future of artificial intelligence.

Often students in sciences are the best learners of Czech because they have an insight into the complexity of morphology through the rational paradigms that its structure offers — provided that the language is presented that way. With the encouragement of an ambitious professor, a class might be composed of highly curious and intellectually productive students who, on their part, challenge not only their peers in the humanities, but their instructor as well. It is a pleasure to teach inventive students whose ideas open new and exciting dimensions in teaching and learning — going far beyond the step-by-step acquisition of everyday Czech. Thus, motivation in today's educational world of immense opportunities is the key to learning.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MOTIVATION

Learning vocabulary of tangible objects and everyday routine — albeit important for daily communication in the Czech Republic — is less satisfactory to highly motivated and eager-to-learn students. A group of theorists have approached motivation research from various aspects, perspectives, and individual needs. For instance, Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan have proposed the “self-determination theory,” which emphasizes students' preference for autonomy in their choices and the pursuit of curiosity. Such students are self-confident and thrive on overcoming challenges and enjoy stumbling over difficult obstacles. Due to its morphological complexity, learning Czech offers them obstacles to overcome and gives them a sense of achieve-

4 As AI continues to develop, one must approach the information it provides with caution. Occasionally, the app produces errors, such as attributing a Czech textbook to a nonexistent or incorrect author. Despite this, AI is increasingly becoming a companion and assistant in daily life around the world: for mothers seeking advice on childcare, for people looking for supportive conversational companion, and for students seeking quick access to information. Many regard this technology as one of the most significant inventions of the 21st century.



ment and success. John W. Atkinson examines behavior driven by the pursuit of success, a framework that resonates with learners who are drawn to languages known for their difficulty. Other theorists stress creativity and enjoyment of non-traditional learning paths where achievement and the thirst for knowledge provide vital motivation. Harvard's David McClelland in his *Theory of Needs*,⁵ highlights power as an intrinsic motivator for students who seek to achieve it through unique expertise. For such students, broadening intellectual horizons is personally meaningful as it allows them to stand out in mastering a difficult language and distinguish themselves from others. These students often exhibit cultural fascination with historical facts and intellectual leaders. Their characteristics come to light during employment interviews and may lead to a job offer in a group of highly selective interviewed candidates. In other words, knowing Czech distinguishes them from the crowd and gives them a sense of achievement in a non-traditional field. A program curriculum that emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and innovative learning pathways is more successful in retaining such students than a traditional curriculum.

THE ROLE OF INSTRUCTOR AND TEACHING MATERIALS ENHANCING MOTIVATION

Students motivated by intrinsic curiosity that leads to exploration of the unknown, the unusual, and the undiscovered may find deep satisfaction in studying a rare language like Czech. This gravitation toward uniqueness helps them shape a differentiated identity — in an environment of media culture that often promotes uniformity and intellectual blindness — which may ultimately lead to the development of unique perspectives and skills.

But how to attract such students to Czech language class in the first place? This answer lies in the selection of topics within the curriculum — which might deviate from the use of traditional textbooks — as well as in the personality of the instructor and teaching approach. A vibrant, enthusiastic and encouraging teacher who communicates in clear, upbeat diction, with a sense of humor and the ability to make each student feel unique, praising his or her progress, can make a difference. An instructor's original, self-confident teaching style can be especially inspiring for young people who are in the process of self-discovery in a complex, anxiety-driven world, as well as of discovery of the world at large. Universal topics rich in ideas that intrigue anyone (finding love, recovering from a loss, mending a friendship) are best introduced from the outset. A simple text about a teenager's struggle with his parents, something many young people can identify with, touches students' core more deeply than phrases to purchase a pastry in a Prague café.⁶ Contrary to common be-

5 For deeper analysis and applications, consult his *Three Needs Theory: Power, Achievement, And Affiliation*, <https://educationlibrary.org/mcclellands-three-needs-theory-power-achievement-and-affiliation/>

6 In the Spring term 2018, a Yale lecturer Laurie R. Santos offered a course called Psychology and the Good Life, which enrolled some 1,200 students, making a history of the



lief among teachers, Czech terminology for abstract concepts can be introduced from the first class, as it is rich with cognates of Indo-European origin (such as *organizovat* or *vidět* — a cognate of Latin's *videre*) and modern loanwords (*idealizovat*, *informovat*, *diskutovat*, *textovat*, *publikovat*, *transformovat*, *googlovat*, *emailovat*, *studovat*, *tancovat*). Such an approach to instruction requires teachers to understand students' psychology and needs, crafting their own creative texts with an intriguing hook and continuously finding new, challenging ideas.

WHERE THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH STANDS NOW

In recent decades, the communicative approach — which emphasizes real-life contexts by reducing grammar to the minimum — has gained popularity in Czech language methodology. In a classroom situation, students might role-play being in a restaurant, ordering drinks and dishes in Czech. This real-life orientation of the communicative method is satisfactory to students who dwell on tangible utilitarianism, whether in Canada or any corner of the United States. With cultural integration, such practical communication has become valuable — if not standard — for US college students who travel each year to Prague, Brno, and other cities to study the language. For this practical learning methodology, Lída Holá, has produced her widely used textbook series *Czech Step by Step*, adopted as a primary or supplementary manual at American colleges, including Harvard, in the past decade. As mentioned above, Holá's textbook was used at the University of Toronto with varying degrees of success during the interim period of Czech instruction between 2018 and 2024.

Both Lída Holá's *Czech Step by Step* and *Czech Express* rely on a colorful and visually dense design, which can feel overwhelming and distracting, particularly for students motivated by intellectual inquiry and rational thinking rather than by tangible object-oriented vocabulary. While Holá's textbooks encourage strong cultural integration via photos of objects, buildings, places, brief historical contexts and Prague's achievements, most texts focus on daily routines (taking public transportation, going to work, doctor visits, shorts trip), presented in a flat manner. Furthermore, brief — if not minimal — explanations of morphology can prove inadequate for highly motivated students, who often feel reduced to a child's level of rote memory learning.

By contrast, James Naughton's *Colloquial Czech*,⁷ published by Routledge in several editions, offers a more systematic and concise treatment of morphology, with frequent dialogues contrasting UK visitors with local Czechs. While heavily vocabulary-driven too, this textbook shows greater sophistication in abstract thinking, striving

ever-largest undergraduate course taught at Yale. She made her name in *The New York Times* and initiated the establishment of a well-being center for students at Yale.

7 The late Oxford University Lecturer James Naughton was a prolific contributor to Czech and Slovak language-learning. Unfortunately, he suffered a stroke in the fall of 2013 and passed away four months later, in October 2014 at the age of 64. His textbooks are still popular in the United Kingdom.



to amuse as well as instruct. Given the gradual decline of rote memorization in the digital age, Naughton's book can overwhelm today's college students with an excessive amount of learning material in each chapter, often loaded with the amount of vocabulary above students' grasp. Instructors tend to supplement these texts with their own materials, short films, or simplified Czech readers adapted for classroom use. Each instructor favors their own methodological approaches; they come down to introducing a particular segment of grammar (past tense, imperative, verbs of motion, noun declensions in the plural), combined with a reading passage in the textbook, followed by pair-drilling practice and conversation.

Reality Czech produced by Christian Hilchey, associate professor of instruction at the University of Texas at Austin, combines a visual approach with interviews and dialogues by native Czechs who studied at UT Austin during the production of his online course. This digital textbook provides several approaches to learning: it introduces morphology, embedding it in the context of living language and providing multiple options for further practice for eager learners. Each of the above-mentioned manuals (along with a variety of others, most of them being published in the Czech Republic) has advantages and drawbacks. For this reason, instructors often alternate them and supplement with additional learning aids.

The current University of Toronto instructor produces a set of her own materials: dialogues, stories based on intriguing ideas. Sophisticated passages from authors, such as Patrik Ouředník, Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, and Karel Čapek, are introduced through short reading passages and discussed as soon as students grasp the basics of Czech morphology, usually by the end of the fall term. The course focuses on abstract thinking and speaking as a reflection of real life. Short films, often produced by FAMO and FAMU students, serve as a springboard for discussions of the lives of young Czechs with those of Canadian students. Realia per se, such as ordering dinner in a restaurant, arise spontaneously during the course since they require knowledge of basic verbs and vocabulary for food and products. Additional short resources (*Výuková videa*, *Czech Reality*, online news) are incorporated at the beginning of the course. During the first classes, the materials are simplified and focused on morphology covered in class and emphasized with additional grammatical examples and practice.

Despite the availability of these resources and instructors' efforts, Czech language courses at North American colleges and universities attract only a small, if not minuscule, number of students.⁸ Enrollment statistics are kept internally by each university but can be disclosed for research purposes. The enrollment statistics below for several recent and past semesters remain low. The following table summarizes enrollment data at Harvard, Columbia and Yale for 2024–5 and 2025–6, based on accessible statistics of each university.

⁸ Until the recent past, Czech at Yale taught by Karen von Kunes had the largest class sizes in the history of Czech language instruction in the US and Canada, typically ranging from 25 to 35 students. Her Yale summer abroad program in Prague maintained a more manageable enrollment, limiting the group to approximately 23 students.



University	Year/ Semester	Elementary Czech	Intermediate Czech	Advanced Czech	Total En- rollment	Notes
Harvard	Fall 2024	3	3 (in 2 sections)	3 (in 2 sections)	9	Avg. 1.8 per course
	Spring 2025	2	3	2	7	Shows 33% attrition
	Fall 2025	3	2 (in 2 sections)	3 (in 2 sections)	8	Avg. 1.75 per course
Columbia	Fall 2024	3	3	2	8	
	Spring 2025	1	2	2	5	40% decline in one year
Yale	Fall 2024	2 (via Columbia)	1 (via Columbia)	0	3	
	Spring 2025	1 (via Columbia)	0	0	1	
	Fall 2025	1 (via Columbia)	0	0	1	

Recent Enrollment Statistics at Three Ivy League Universities

In Fall 2025, to accommodate students' schedules while maintaining viable enrollment, Harvard's three courses were split into five sections: two each for Intermediate and Advanced Czech. With one or two students per section, the five courses collectively enrolled only eight students, yielding an average of just 1.6 students per course.

In the Spring 2025 term Elementary Czech lost one-third of its students (33.33%) or 1 out of 3 from Fall 2024. Given that Harvard undergraduates must fulfill a one-year language requirement in a language other than English to graduate, the attrition of even a single student mid-year is concerning.

The tutorial approach has long been standard at the University of Oxford — but not at Harvard which allows a maximum of twelve students in one language class. Splitting Czech courses into sections of only one or two students might be beneficial for the involved students, but it increases the number of contact hours for the instructor (at Harvard called a preceptor).

Whenever Harvard advertises for a Czech or any other “minor” language instructor, the job description routinely includes a responsibility to “assist with recruitment of students and expanding interest in the language program,”⁹ in addition to teaching language classes and possibly running a summer language class abroad. Unfortunately, enrollment data over the past decade show little evidence of expanded student interest. Over the last twelve years, on average Harvard's Czech courses at the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels have attracted only 2.3 students per course (with annual enrollments fluctuating between five to nine students — yielding an average of just 7.1 across the entire Czech language program per academic

⁹ Quoted from the 2022 advertisement of the Czech position published in professional journals of Slavic organizations.

year). These statistics are striking, given that Harvard was once the primary producer of Czech specialists in the US and a pioneer in establishing Czech Studies in North America on Roman Jakobson's initiative. Today, one can only hope that federal policies will not exacerbate the challenges already facing Czech programs at Harvard and other universities with low-enrollment languages.

Enrollment statistics at Columbia University in New York City closely mirrors those at Harvard. In Spring 2025, Columbia had only one student enrolled in Elementary Czech, a drop of two students from three in Elementary Czech in the Fall term 2024. Similarly, in Spring 2025, Intermediate Czech dropped to two students, down from three in the previous semester. Advanced Czech, offered as Readings in Czech Literature I and II, has maintained steady enrollment with two students in both Fall 2024 and Spring 2025. Altogether, Czech courses at Columbia totaled only five students in Spring 2025 — a 40% decline in just one academic year, from eight students in Fall 2024.

Fortunately, in addition to Czech language courses, Senior Lecturer Christopher Harwood teaches a course in English, “The Writers of Prague,” which enrolled seven students in Spring 2025. This course covers Prague's cultural and literary history, with an emphasis on Prague writers between the years 1895 and 1938. While this enrollment represents a modest improvement in overall engagement with Czech Studies, the enrollment figures for the Czech language sequence demonstrate the ongoing challenge of attracting and retaining students. The enrollment is strikingly low, especially given Columbia's total student population of approximately 33,400, including around 6,700 undergraduates. In addition, the language statistics include Yale students after the departure of Yale's lector, whose classes used to average to 25–35 students.

Christopher Harwood's Ph.D. in Czech and longstanding dedication to Czech studies suggest that, as someone committed to his *scholarly vocation*, he needs to increase enrollments with institutional support and strategic outreach. Since Fall 2023, Yale University students interested in Czech have been registering through Columbia after Yale discontinued its once thriving program in Czech language, literature, film, and culture following Karen von Kunes's departure for the University of Toronto. At Yale, Dr. von Kunes had built and directed the program for several decades, earning national recognition as one of *The Best 300 Professors* by *The Princeton Review* (Random House, 2012). After her departure, Yale students were reassigned to online instruction via Columbia. In the Spring and Fall 2025 semesters, no Yale student enrolled in the second year Czech with Dr. Harwood, and only one Yale student joined first-year Czech, alongside Columbia's already small enrollment.

By contrast, during the height of von Kunes's teaching at Yale, the program produced several distinguished alumni—among them the first Rhodes Scholar in Czech at Oxford, now completing a doctorate on contemporary Czech women's literature. In Fall 2025, this scholar was joined by a University of Toronto student whose doctoral research focuses on literary mystification in the works of Patrik Ouředník and Czech spiritual leaders.





TEACHERS OF CZECH, NOT PROFESSORS

Czech language teachers in Canada and the United States generally fall into two categories. The first are those who teach Czech as a *chosen vocation*: Ph.D. graduates who remain committed to the field they developed during their studies and see teaching Czech as part of a lifelong scholarly pursuit. The second category consists of teachers who enter the profession out of necessity, which is their *chosen employment*. These are typically native speakers who accept Czech language teaching positions because the opportunity presents itself, but who often regard the work as uninspiring, even frustrating. For them, language instruction is less a vocation and more a programmatic obligation, rarely regarded as a valued scholarly endeavor. Both groups face structural disadvantages due to their non-tenure-track status, limiting professional recognition and long-term program stability. Regardless of credentials, teachers of Czech in North America most often hold titles of instructor, preceptor, lector, lecturer, teaching professor, or professor of the practice. These ranks, while essential to university operations, lack the privileges of tenured faculty positions: higher salaries and retirement benefits, sabbatical leaves, access to prestigious research grants, invitations to lecture, promotion to tenure, endowed chairs, the opportunity to teach literature (which conveys the status of “literary scholar” rather than “language instructor”), supervision of doctoral research, and the production of monographs.

Those who teach Czech out of necessity (*chosen employment*) typically share one common feature: Czech is their native language, though their advanced degree is often in unrelated fields. Universities, including Harvard and the University of Chicago, have hired such native speakers under minimal requirements—sometimes only a B.A.—on the assumption that native speaker’s immersion in Czech schooling ensures their cultural competence. Too often, however, these hires lack interest in the science and pedagogy of language teaching, finding instruction tedious. It is, therefore, little surprising that students of Czech in North America are becoming, in effect, “a rare species.”

However, the economics are straightforward: universities, like markets, respond to demand. Keynesian economic theory provides a useful parallel: the production of goods should be based on consumer demand. Just as this principle guides North American economic policy, it increasingly shapes higher education instructional policies — though not always in the highest ethical manner. For example, the University of Nebraska has attempted to boost enrollments by offering students a \$300 cash incentive—no questions asked—merely for registering in Czech. By contrast, an award recognizing excellence would likely attract competitive students who value recognition for their own work and achievement.

Students are central to teaching — without them, there are no teachers. In the absence of students, the future of Czech language instruction in North America risks becoming confined to heritage communities. These dynamics reveal both opportunities and constraints: Czech thrives when aligned with students’ intrinsic motivation but struggles when evaluated by market demand alone.

CONCLUSIONS

Czech studies in North America occupy a paradoxical position: intellectually rich and culturally vital, yet institutionally precarious. Enrollment numbers at Harvard, Columbia, and Yale highlight the marginalization of Czech within elite universities. At the University of Toronto, the program lacks graduate-level offerings and is likely to survive only with external funding, rather than through full institutional support.

The evidence suggests that the future of Czech studies depends on three factors: (1) sustained institutional support; (2) innovative teaching methodologies that integrate cultural and digital resources; and (3) recognition of student motivation as the decisive driver of enrollment and retention. The sustainability of Czech programs ultimately hinges on students, whose intrinsic motivation drives enrollment, and on faculty, whose dedication can inspire and cultivate interest despite limited resources.

While this paper emphasizes descriptive analysis of several institutions, further research should pursue topics, such as extensive study of enrollment trends across multiple North American universities, comparative analysis of Czech with other so-called “small” and “minor” languages (Ukrainian, Polish, Slovak) to contextualize challenges, investigation into the impact of digital learning tools (AI applications) on student recruitment and retention, qualitative interviews with students and instructors to assess how motivation theories apply in practice.

In addition, instructors of Czech in American universities would benefit from reflecting on the basics of capitalist economy, which infuses not only commerce but nearly every domain of modern life—including love and marriage, as well as the teaching of foreign languages. If Czech were promoted with similar ingenuity to commercial products, it might find broader popularity. Czech is a uniquely rich and expressive language: playful in its metaphors, sharp in its humor, colorful in its non-standard expressions, and capable of extraordinary literary nuance.

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