An Unforeseen Consequence of the Boom in Spanish: Who Is Teaching the Majors?

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During the last twenty years extraordinary demographic changes have occurred in the United States that have affected enrollments in foreign language programs. According to the 2000 census, the Hispanic population grew by 61% from 1990 and now constituted 13.3% of the total population. Of this Hispanic population 40% is foreign born, and, as a consequence, Spanish language use has increased in many parts of the country. Spanish radio and TV broadcasts are readily accessible in virtually all major United States cities. In addition, the growing visibility of the Hispanic population has brought increased recognition and popularity of Latin popular culture across the nation, especially among younger generations. Research has shown that in Miami Hispanics who speak both Spanish and English very well have higher incomes and higher educational attainment than Hispanics who speak only English (Boswell). The reality in Miami, and the perception in much of the rest of the country, is that there are economic advantages to knowing Spanish in addition to English.

During this same period, Spanish language enrollments at United States postsecondary institutions have boomed, rising from 379,379 in 1980 to 533,944 in 1990 to 746,267 in 2002 (Welles), an increase of 96.7% in just over twenty years. By 2002 postsecondary enrollments in Spanish represented 53.4% of the total enrollments in all foreign language courses. Most Spanish programs have seen immense growth in student numbers in the first two years of language instruction. The number of undergraduates majoring in Spanish has followed similar trends. Between 1995 and 1999, 65% of Spanish programs reported increases in the number of majors; this number was even higher (73%) for PhD-granting departments (Goldberg, Lusin, and Welles). A number of program features correlate strongly with increased numbers of majors, among them study-abroad opportunities, high enrollments in the introductory sequence, enrollment growth in advanced courses, growth in the number of double majors and minors, a foreign language graduation requirement, assessment of incoming students, support for faculty members, and special opportunities for campus- or community-based language study or practice outside the classroom (Goldberg, Lusin, and Welles).

The Spanish program at my home institution, the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, includes all the features listed above, as well as several of those found to have an occasional correlation with growth in the number of majors, namely, a language program coordinator, instructional use of technology, a language center on campus, and advanced curricular approaches (Goldberg, Lusin, and Welles). Our department had approximately 100 majors in 1985; this number increased to 250 by 1995, and currently there are just under 450 majors, according to departmental records.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the department dedicated considerable effort to the improvement of our undergraduate curriculum. We developed two new entry-level courses to the major—an introduction to Hispanic culture and an introduction to Hispanic linguistics—which serve as gateway

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courses together with the existing introduction to literary analysis. All three introductory courses are required of majors, and each of them is officially a writing-intensive course, involving ten or more pages of formal academic writing in Spanish. We also developed new upper-division courses in culture and linguistics, which provided additional options for students. A senior seminar was added in which students develop a capstone paper written in Spanish or Portuguese required for graduation. In response to the extraordinary growth of the Latino community in the Twin Cities, which has tripled over the past ten years, we developed courses on Spanish for medicine and Spanish for heritage speakers. We added a successful service-learning course, which allows students to work three hours a week in one of twenty-four organizations that serve the Latino community in the metro area while they engage in academic work related to the Latino experience in the United States. This course grew from one section a semester when it was first offered in 1998 to the current three sections a semester plus one in summer. In recent years we have added a service-learning component to a course on United States Latino theater as well as to a new upper-division course focusing on medical Spanish. The Spanish Writing Center was instituted in fall 1999 to serve the needs of upper-division students (see the description in Strong and Fruth). We developed a technology-enhanced option for second-semester Spanish (see Echávez Solano) and have increased the use of technology in the second-year language program as well. Finally, students who had completed at least two years of language instruction were able to take course work in Spanish in other disciplines through the Foreign Language across the Curriculum Program (see Metcalf; Klee and Metcalf) and the Foreign Language Immersion Program (see Klee and Tedick; Lynch, Klee, and Tedick).

These efforts to improve the undergraduate curriculum were made not with the intention of attracting more majors but rather out of a commitment to improve the educational experience of undergraduate Spanish students. However, in part because of the increasing presence of Spanish in the United States—including Minnesota—and in part because of the curricular improvements in our program, the number of majors increased by 350% between 1985 and 2005. This growth has not been matched by growth in tenure-line faculty positions. During the same period, the number of faculty members specializing in Spanish increased by only 30%, from 10 to 13. Consequently, more than 50% of our upper-division undergraduate curriculum beyond third-year language courses is taught by teaching specialists, lecturers, and advanced graduate students. As demand for Spanish courses has grown at all levels, the number of teaching specialists and lecturers has increased in our department from 11 full-time non-tenure-track faculty members in 1994, when such teachers were first hired, to 30 in 2005.

As a result of concerns expressed by faculty members university-wide over the increasing numbers of non-tenure-track faculty members hired in the 1990s (see Sullivan), the University of Minnesota in 2001 adopted new guidelines on academic appointments, which brought about important changes. Because of concerns about the imbalance between tenured and tenure-track faculty members and contract faculty members, each college was required to develop a personnel plan that would include a supplemental plan for any unit in which the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) contract faculty positions plus the number of FTE academic professional positions with primary responsibility for teaching exceeds 25% of the FTE tenured and tenure-track faculty members. If lines for upcoming searches are included, the percentage in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Studies approaches 200%. The supplemental plan for our department states the following:

*Contract Faculty and Academic Professional Staff are most likely to be used to teach introductory language courses when regular faculty cannot provide the needed instruction. It is the responsibility of the department chair to allocate the teaching resources of the regular faculty in a fashion that reaches a balance between the instructional needs of advanced undergraduate and graduate courses.*

The reality, however, is that contract faculty and academic professional staff not only teach introductory language courses as they have in the past but, along with graduate students, also teach most of our upper-division program. Although the University of Minnesota policy states that the Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee will review these numbers of contract faculty and academic professional staff, which are documented annually by the executive vice president and provost in conjunction with the vice president for human resources, to ensure “consistency with the approved plan and the
academic mission of the University,” said review has not addressed the striking disparities in our department at the time of this writing.

It is clear that this situation is not exclusive to the University of Minnesota. In a recent PBS documentary and book, Declining by Degrees, various scholars lament the current state of undergraduate education in the United States. For example, David L. Kirp describes the situation at the University of Chicago in this way: “At Chicago, the ideal of a college where intellectually obsessive undergraduates are instructed in small classes collides with a shabbier reality. . . . Even in the humanities and social sciences, nearly two-thirds of classes are taught by graduate students and adjunct instructors” (125–26). While in foreign language departments at large public universities, first-, second-, and often third-year language classes have usually been taught by graduate students and adjunct or contract faculty members, traditionally the upper-division curriculum has been delivered primarily by tenure-line faculty members. The change in the personnel delivering upper-division instruction that has occurred over the past ten years mainly affects Spanish programs. Many other language programs (e.g., 37% of French programs, 39% of German programs, 32% of Japanese programs, and 54% of Russian programs [Goldberg, Lusin, and Welles]) have had to deal with declining enrollments in the major and the different types of problems that this decline entails.

As Spanish becomes the de facto second language of the United States, enrollments in the Spanish major are closer to those of the English department than to those of other foreign language programs. However, while most English departments deliver instruction primarily to students who speak English as a native language or who have advanced proficiency in English as a second language, most Spanish majors are second-language learners, even with the increase in heritage Spanish speakers. Research has shown that most foreign language learners only attain a level of 2+ on the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) scale by the time they graduate (Carroll; Lett and Keesling). Speakers at this level cannot yet consistently “provide a structured argument to explain and defend opinions and develop effective hypotheses with extended discourse” (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, and Swender 18), an ability that is usually expected in upper-division courses. This means that upper-division courses must be carefully designed to introduce sophisticated content and concepts while at the same time providing opportunities for advanced language development. The United States Department of Defense recently issued a white paper setting FSI level 3 as the desired target for language learners. Because of the language learning needs of Spanish majors, most programs have tried to limit class size in upper-division courses to between 25 and 30 students. This need aggravates the staffing problem since successful content mastery as well as advanced language practice to bring Spanish majors to the desired FSI level 3 cannot occur effectively in the large lecture sections of 130 students found in entry-level survey courses to the English major.

One potential solution to the staffing problem is through the expansion of foreign language across the curriculum (FLAC) programs and the teaching of courses in other disciplines in Spanish. An ideal model can be found in the sheltered, or adjunct, courses offered in French for native English speakers at the University of Ottawa, where subjects such as psychology are taught through the students’ second language. Evaluations of this program stress the need for well-taught disciplinary courses as well as a carefully conceived language component if students are to be successful (see Burger, Wesche, and Migneron). This combination is crucial, yet it is also difficult to achieve; in our experience not all content professors in other disciplines are willing to spend the time to adapt their instructional strategies for second-language students (see Klee and Tedick). Furthermore, while FLAC programs were initiated with great enthusiasm at a wide variety of postsecondary institutions in the 1980s and 1990s as interest rose in internationalizing the curriculum and as funding agencies provided support, once external funding ended, many programs suffered major reductions in the number and types of courses they are able to offer and some programs have ceased operating (see Klee and Barnes). If the renewal of FLAC programs is to be a viable alternative to address the current crisis in upper-division Spanish programs, then external funding is once again needed to assist with its implementation.

In conclusion, the staffing issues facing upper-division Spanish programs are serious. Departments like mine in which the size of the tenure-line Spanish faculty is unlikely to grow because of budget constraints and other collegiate priorities face some unpleasant options. Do we try to redirect the tide of Spanish majors to other disciplines? This
option will not appeal to students unless instruction in those disciplines focuses both on content and the development of advanced Spanish skills. Do we put strict limits on the number of majors and minors we accept, denying students access to advanced Spanish courses? Alternatives that do not further jeopardize the quality of instruction (e.g., by increasing class size substantially) and that do not require increased funding and new faculty lines are few. Despite the limited alternatives, Spanish programs must respond to the challenges facing them and engage the support and commitment of university administrators. In addition, they should join forces with other departments facing similar circumstances to work toward solutions. Spanish departments cannot, and should not, try to go it alone; coalition building is essential if this problem is to be addressed. To accept the status quo reinforces the historically low status of Spanish in relation to other modern languages in United States research institutions and does not serve the best interests of our students or the profession.

Notes

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1. The number of Spanish minors has also increased greatly at most institutions.

2. For a course to be designated writing-intensive the syllabus must indicate how writing serves the goals of the course; there must be at least ten to fifteen pages of formal writing; at least one assignment must require revision; and the course grade must be tied to the quality of student writing.

3. In addition, 2 full-time tenured faculty members specialize in Portuguese.

4. Teaching specialists have at least an MA, and lecturers have a PhD. Both positions are yearly renewable.

5. Among the changes, the length of service duration for teaching specialists and lecturers was no longer capped at three years, and the Faculty Retirement Plan was available to them. In addition, each college was required to develop criteria and procedures to specify the hiring (selection and appointment processes) and promotional requirements for these positions. The full policy can be found at http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/ohrpolicy/Hiring/Academic/. See also Melin.


7. Heritage learners raised in the United States usually have had limited access to academic Spanish, and their language learning needs differ from those of second-language learners of Spanish (Valdés and Geoffrion-Vinci).

8. Level 2 proficiency is described by the FSI as equivalent to “limited working proficiency.” Speakers at this level are “characterized by the ability to participate actively in conversations in most informal and some formal settings on topics of personal and public interest; narrate and describe in major time frames with good control of aspect; deal effectively with uncomplicated complications through a variety of communicative devices; sustain communication by using, with suitable accuracy and confidence, connected discourse of paragraph length and substance; satisfy the demands of work and/or school situations” (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, and Swender 18).

9. The best example of this type of program is the undergraduate German curriculum, Developing Multiple Literacies, at Georgetown University, which spans the entire four-year period of undergraduate study (see www3.georgetown.edu/departments/german/programs/curriculum/index.html).

10. Level 3 speakers “are able to communicate in the language with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain complex matters in detail, and provide lengthy and coherent narrations, all with ease, fluency, and accuracy. They explain their opinions on a number of topics of importance to them, such as social and political issues, and provide structured argument to support their opinions. They are able to construct and develop hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities. When appropriate, they use extended discourse without unnaturally lengthy hesitation to make their point, even when engaged in abstract elaborations. Such discourse, while coherent, may still be influenced by the Superior speakers own language patterns, rather than those of the target language” (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 3).

11. See Stavans for a recent reflection on this issue.

12. See Waxman; Spell; Withers; Leavitt; Avelar.

Works Cited


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Spanish is the most studied second language in the United States. Many Americans start learning it in middle school or high school, but most of us never reach a level where we can really communicate in Spanish. I studied Spanish for all four years of high school and have almost nothing to show for it besides, ‘Me llamo John-Erik. Yo nací en Los Angeles.’ Don’t isolate your study of the language from the rest of your life, you’re not learning Spanish in order to talk about learning Spanish. In addition, we are extremely grateful to the instructors who allowed us into their classes numerous times and who graciously agreed to be interviewed for this study. (Foell, 2006). Similarly, the U.S. Department of Defense has announced level 3 on the Foreign Service Institute scale as the desired target for language learners (cf. This article describes a third-year Spanish grammar course that is taught in lecture/discussion format. The course, which enrolls over 150 students each semester, provides explicit instruction during a weekly lecture and opportunities for students to engage in meaningful output and interaction during small group discussion sessions. The goal is to teach grammar as a communicative tool in which form, meaning, and use are clearly integrated (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).