Not What It Used to Be: 
The Future of Spanish Language Teaching

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RESPONSE

Being Ready Means Responding to the Question of Who Is Enrolling

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Abstract: Since 1970, higher education in general, and Spanish departments in particular, have experienced a seismic shift, with skyrocketing student enrollment and dramatic increases in the numbers of non-tenure-track faculty. While contingent faculty numbers have continued to rise since 2000, over the past several years, enrollments in college-level Spanish courses seem to have stabilized. I will examine historical and current data, as well as projected statistics, before exploring possible consequences of these recent trends, in particular, how a more stable body of non-tenure-track faculty relates to enriched departmental culture and improved student learning in Spanish departments.

Keywords: enrollment/matrícula, faculty status/situación del profesorado, non-tenure-track faculty/profesorado titular (sin cátedra), Spanish departments/departamentos de español, student learning/aprendizaje de estudiantes

Introduction

Higher education has changed dramatically since 1970, particularly in terms of enrollment and faculty status. Nationwide, university programs—including Spanish departments—have witnessed increases in student enrollment and expansion of faculty off the tenure track. As a point of departure, this essay will place Spanish departments in a historical context, and then explore potential directions for our future. By offering a brief overview and possible forecasts, my aim is to spark conversation about how Spanish programs can evolve as higher education travels deeper into the twenty-first century.

Federal data illustrate the dramatic increase in student enrollment at post-secondary institutions since 1970. Collected by the US Department of Education’s National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), data on full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment in four-year public and non-profit private institutions reveal 5,145,422 in enrollment in 1970; by 2014, that number had essentially doubled (“Full-time” 2016). Likewise, postsecondary institutions awarded more degrees, with the number of Bachelor’s degrees more than doubling between 1970 and 2014. Master’s more than tripled, and even doctorates (including MD, JD, etc.) nearly tripled, rising from 60,000 in 1970 to more than 177,000 in 2014 (“Degrees Conferred” 2016).

With higher enrollment, the number of faculty in the classroom necessarily increased. Across institutions nationwide, between 1975 and 2011, the number of faculty increased by 130%, with over 90% of that growth attributable to contingent positions (Curtis 2014). In addition to reporting on the increase of part-time and full-time non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty, Curtis observed a dramatic increase of 122.8% in the employment of graduate students during that same period (2014). Certainly, national data trends differ according to institutional category, part- or full-time status, and disciplinary field. Yet, scholars have underscored that, although the numbers of tenure-track positions nationwide increased, the largest increase has occurred among NTT ranks, primarily part-time faculty (e.g., Curtis 2014; Kezar and Sam 2010).
Spanish Departments since 1970

Anyone who has taught in a Spanish department during the past fifteen years has witnessed an increase in overall enrollment, as statistics from the Modern Language Association's (MLA) Language Enrollment Database illustrate. There were 386,000 enrolled nationwide in Spanish in 1970; that declined slightly before rising dramatically by 1990 to over 530,000. By 2013 there was nearly double the 1970 enrollment ("Spanish" 2014). This increase in higher education echoes changes in secondary schools, where NCES found that the percentage of high school graduates who take at least one unit of Spanish more than doubled between 1982 and 2009 ("Percentage" 2007; "Number and Percentage" 2014). Likewise, the numbers of Advanced Placement (AP) tests taken in Spanish Language and Literature have increased thirtyfold since 1980, when some 5,000 exams were taken ("Advanced Placement" 1980); by 2015, there were over 166,000 ("AP Exam" 2015).

Enrollment increases have impacted hiring into Spanish departments; however, pinpointing faculty status in Spanish departments is difficult due to a lack of data. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), an arm of the NCES, offers data on faculty status from before 1970. However, IPEDS categorizes faculty by their primary function (e.g., instructional, research), rather than specific field of instruction. Between 1988 and 2004, the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF) collected higher education data, including fields of instruction. Drawing on NSOPF statistics, David Laurence (2008) found that the number of full-time tenure track/tenured faculty in foreign languages (FL) increased by 27% between 1993 and 2004; full-time NTT faculty increased by 69%; and part-time NTT faculty, by 25% (27, Table 1). Furthermore, in 2004, NTTs in four-year institutions comprised 50% of FL faculty; at two-year institutions, nearly 87% (Laurence 2008: 2). While the presence of graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) is not accounted for in the NSOPF data, the MLA’s own 1999 survey of FL departments found that in doctoral departments, full-time tenured/tenure-track positions comprised 28% of faculty, with full-time NTTs at 12%; part-time faculty at 12%, and TAs at 48%. Yet, at bachelor’s institutions, 46% of FL faculty members were tenured/tenure track; 15% were full-time NTTs; 35% were part-time and only 4% were TAs. Two-year colleges employed the most contingent faculty, with only 26% tenured/tenure track; 5% full-time NTT; 69% part-time; and 0% TAs (Laurence 2001: 213, Table 1). Thus, while data on faculty status specific to foreign languages are limited and vary with institutional category (Laurence 2001: 214), these statistical snapshots indicate an increase in both TAs and NTTs in our FL classrooms. Here, my focus is the role of NTT faculty, but further examination of TAs is needed to thoroughly understand instructional trends in many Spanish departments.

Recent and Future Trends

Given the tremendous changes in higher education since 1970, recent trends will help focus our discussion of the future. From 2000–12, FTE enrollment across institutional categories increased 38% nationwide ("Full-time" 2014), with an increase in Bachelor’s degrees of about 45%; data from 2000–12 show 63% and 43% respective increases in master’s and doctorates ("Degrees Conferred" 2016). Federal forecasts predict a slower and steadier increase—15% across categories—in FTE enrollment by 2025, with variation according to institutional type ("Full-time" 2016). Looking ahead to 2040, however, Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro (2015) expect enrollment to “increase to record levels,” as college graduates continue to benefit from higher lifetime earnings relative to those with high school education (170).

Future changes in Spanish enrollment are difficult to foretell; however, recent data suggest that dramatic increases have leveled off, at least for now. Between 2002 and 2013, Spanish enrollments increased, but only by 6% ("Spanish" 2014). A recent MLA report showed that university
enrollment in Spanish declined 8% since the all-time high in 2009 (Goldberg, Looney, and Lusin 2015: 2), with a 5.7% decline in undergraduate and a 20.5% drop in graduate enrollments (5). Moreover, the authors observed a nearly 10% decline in first majors in Spanish since 2009 (81, Table 14). At the secondary level, between 2000 and 2009 the percentage of high school (HS) graduates with at least one year of Spanish doubled to 69%; however, the average number of HS credits taken—2.2—has remained relatively stable (“Number and Percentage” 2014). Finally, although the number of AP Spanish exams increased 127% since 2000, the percentage of Spanish exams among all AP exams has declined steadily, dropping from an all-time high of 5.8% in 2000 to 3.7% in 2015 (“AP Exam” 2010; “AP Exam” 2015), putting the current percentage at 1980s-era levels.

More students, thus, are taking high school Spanish courses, but a smaller percentage of AP students are taking AP Spanish exams. Meanwhile, fewer four-year institutions require foreign language (FL) for admission: Natalia Lusin (2012) notes that in 1965–66, one-third of four-year institutions required FL study, but by 1982–83 that number had fallen to 14.1%. Since then, language requirements for university admission have rebounded slightly but steadily, with 2009–10 levels at almost 25% for four-year institutions (1–2). At the same time, four-year institutions requiring a FL course for graduation hit a low of 47% in 1982, rebounded to 68% in 1994, and again dropped to 50% in 2009. So, at the same time that FL admission requirements have trended slightly upward, fewer institutions require foreign language for graduation (Lusin 2012: 1), suggesting that university language study is not incentivized (Goldberg, Looney, and Lusin 2015: 15). Finally, a projected decline in humanities degrees (Morson and Schapiro 2015: 161–64) also suggests that fewer students may pursue FL graduation requirements, as many non-humanities degrees do not require language study. When combined with a slower, national increase in FTE, these trends suggest that nationally, Spanish enrollment should hold relatively steady, or perhaps decline, in the near term.

As we have seen, national faculty status trends are impossible to identify in Spanish departments, and until data can be collected nationwide, individual institutions must collect and analyze their own statistics to reveal possible directions. Without this information for all institutions, however, we have to rely on general trends to inform forecasts. As enrollment across disciplines and in Spanish increased since 2000, the percentage of NTT faculty continued to increase nationwide, with the most significant increase in part-time faculty (Curtis 2014). However, in looking across institutional categories, Steven Schulman (2015) found a slight decrease in part-time positions (1.7%) and in untenured, tenure-track faculty (1.4%) from 2005 to 2013, while full-time NTT positions increased by 2.7%. Despite variations according to institutional category, Schulman found that contingent faculty overall have increased from 62.6% to 63.6% since 2005 (2015). Regardless of whether this blip in solidifying multiple part-time positions into full-time posts becomes a trend, it is clear that faculty primarily hail from NTT ranks. And, in looking toward the future, this trend will likely continue, with Morson and Schapiro estimating that by 2040, only 10% of faculty will be on tenure track (2015: 160).

Higher education funding clearly plays a crucial role in the continued increase in NTT faculty nationwide, but is too complex to address in this essay. Yet, along with revenue trends, sociopolitical shifts have resulted in scholars, as well as social and mainstream media, examining the role of NTT faculty. The topic is ubiquitous in outlets such as Inside Higher Ed, The Chronicle of Higher Education and The Wall Street Journal. Scholarly associations like the MLA explore the role of NTTs, and organizations such as New Faculty Majority ensure that the relationship of adjunct faculty to undergraduate education is at the forefront of any discussion of academia. Labor unions (SEIU, AFT, etc.) have ramped up efforts to unionize contingent faculty; and, even where their efforts to unionize have been challenged (Duquesne and Pacific Lutheran, among others), the process itself has focused attention on the role of adjuncts. Some accreditation agencies likewise are examining various factors related to non-tenure-track faculty as part of their
criteria. As scholars have noted, “the impact of the changing faculty . . . provides the rationale for the accreditation community’s involvement” because “student outcomes have been a main focus in accreditation for the last fifteen years” (Kezar, Maxey, and Eaton 2014; 9). Further, these authors both identified those accreditation agencies that have incorporated NTT-related criteria, and outlined future steps for accrediting bodies. Enhanced media presence, unionization efforts, and accreditation reform also have resulted in attention to these issues from the US Congress and the Senate. And, as national conversations on student debt continue to unfold, further discussion of faculty status is inevitable.

Possible Outcomes for Spanish Departments

Admittedly, the statistics examined here highlight the difficulty of making clear predictions about the future of higher education. Yet in this uncertain climate, we can choose to view the glass half-full, at least for Spanish departments. With projected increased stability in undergraduate enrollment, Spanish programs nationwide can more effectively determine staffing needs, and, when combined with external pressures, can participate in more purposeful hiring practices of NTT faculty that improve overall teaching outcomes. Whether relying on multiple, part-time positions or fewer, full-time ones, departments can offer multi-term contracts for a core group of Spanish faculty. In turn, administrators can highlight this practice to students, accreditation agencies, even the media. Without question, external forces will ebb and flow, and enrollment will vary from one term to the next—departments will always need to be agile to address fluctuations. However, if departments and institutions collect and review enrollment and faculty status data annually, then individual patterns should emerge. And, with this information, Spanish programs can make a better case with deans, human resources (HR), and others for a thoughtful and stable approach to hiring—ensuring that departments and their students benefit from the consequences.

For students, faculty, and institutions, there are several benefits of stabilized enrollment and staffing. First, if departmental and/or HR administrators and staff are freed from frantic, last-minute hiring each term, they can redirect resources towards other matters, positively impacting efficiency. Moreover, identifying faculty members on course schedules, websites, etc., acknowledges the key role that these professionals play in the educational mission, and demonstrates to students that institutions care about their learning. Students could also more actively choose their instructor, potentially resulting in better alignment of student expectations with instruction, as well as in enhanced learning.

Another benefit concerns teacher feedback and interaction. If a department hires a majority of its Spanish language faculty on multi-term contracts before August, it knows how many faculty members will use a physical office throughout the academic year. A current challenge for many contingent faculty, access to office space directly affects student learning. Studies on learning repeatedly point to the important role that teacher feedback plays in learning outcomes (e.g., Shute 2008). And, by holding office hours in a consistent location that allows for some confidentiality, faculty have the chance to ensure this reliable interaction with, and tutoring of, students. Likewise, an office promotes informal communication with colleagues and TAs; these conversations, in turn, can result in curricular collaboration, as well as in mentoring and professional support. This can also be true for part-time faculty who may need to leave after office hours to teach elsewhere. Even brief, personal interaction with colleagues can boost virtual collaboration on course design and implementation. Finally, office space facilitates interaction with tenure-track colleagues, allowing both groups of faculty the chance to better understand and appreciate each other’s role in the department’s mission.

A steady group of Spanish language faculty—whether part- and/or full-time—will also lead to curricular initiatives that appeal to student learning needs and goals. Spanish language
faculty inevitably apply their expertise in second language acquisition (SLA) and pedagogy, as well as in other fields, to the courses they teach. Faculty who feel invested in a department can reinvigorate introductory/intermediate curricula and practice with current pedagogy and technology. A department can also capitalize on these specializations to strengthen its curriculum at all levels—by offering new courses, such as a sociolinguistics or creative nonfiction class; by revising standing courses to better integrate linguistic and cultural proficiency goals; or by relying on NTT expertise in SLA to train TAs. Through their diverse connections in the world beyond the university, NTT faculty also may enhance internship and/or service learning opportunities for students. Thus, departments can broaden their appeal to students, especially within today’s context of Spanish as an increasingly secondary major.

A core group of Spanish language faculty also allows the department to both diversify and strengthen its faculty profile. Incorporating NTT faculty into a department’s culture, even its website, more clearly demonstrates the program’s wide breadth of expertise. Departments can benefit from varied expertise through NTT participation in committee work and shared governance. The department’s faculty profile may encompass literary and cultural studies, as well as SLA, linguistics, and other fields such as business or creative writing. This diverse faculty profile is then clear to both students as well as to faculty from other departments—reinforcing the Spanish department’s role as a leader in interdisciplinary approaches to teaching, learning, and research. In sum, faculty availability and curricular initiatives are just a couple ways that our future Spanish students can benefit from stable hiring practices.

Conclusion

We have seen marked changes in higher education generally, and Spanish departments specifically, since 1970. In the last fifteen years, the world of post-secondary education has continued to change, with the twin upward trends of student enrollment and instruction by NTT faculty. Yet in Spanish departments more specifically we have seen enrollment slow down somewhat since 2000, with our first drop since 1980 taking place 2009–13. Although predictions of the future are risky at best, university Spanish enrollment nationwide should hold relatively steady over the coming years. Declining percentages of AP exams in Spanish, as well as slow increases in the percentage of four-year institutions that require foreign language both for admission and for graduation suggest that university foreign language study is not highly incentivized. This is echoed in the increasing number of students whose Spanish major is secondary, rather than primary, and even in the recent decline of graduate study in Spanish.

This more steady enrollment trend, when combined with external pressures, ought to result in more stabilized faculty hiring nationwide. It seems clear that Spanish language faculty will continue to hail from non-tenure-track ranks, yet individual programs and institutions should track and review their own data to forecast hiring needs, as enrollment trends in specific departments and institutions vary from national numbers. A purposeful and systematic approach to hiring Spanish language faculty will result in enhanced learning for our students, as well as in enriched departmental curricula and faculty profiles. Ironically, these same improvements could very well lead our future Spanish departments back to the enrollment increases of recent decades—leading us full circle and ensuring continued self-reflection on our role in higher education.

NOTES

1 This essay uses “Spanish department” to refer to any program or department that offers Spanish courses, regardless of the organizing unit’s title (e.g., Department of Modern Languages, etc.).

2 Despite the variety in off-tenure-track positions, the terms contingent, adjunct, and non-tenure-track faculty will be used interchangeably throughout these pages.
WORKS CITED


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Who is teaching is significant to any discussion about the future of Spanish and all foreign language programs, as highlighted by professional organizations like the Modern Language Association and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages, to name just two. Certainly the roles and stability of non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty are fundamental questions moving forward. Last minute hiring benefits no one and often does not allow our NTT colleagues the opportunity to contribute fully at all levels of the educational enterprise.

Still, in light of disquieting recent events on college campuses across our nation (e.g., protests against racial injustices and the rescission of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), confederate and historical monument controversies, trigger warnings, and debates about free speech), the profession must not underestimate the meaning of both who our departments will be teaching and what it is that population of students desires from college more generally in the twenty-first-century context. Being “student-ready,” as Byron P. White (2016) calls it, would not represent a mere reaction to the demands of the moment; but rather, the acknowledgement of demographic and sociocultural realities as relevant to the lenses through which current and future college students view higher education. The students, who swelled the overall enrollments in Spanish during the last fifteen years, are not the same as those who will occupy the classrooms of the next decade and likely beyond.

Data from the United States Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), Digest of Educational Statistics reveal that from 2012 to 2023 the number of students twenty-five and over is forecasted to increase at a higher rate than that of students under age twenty-five (2013). Furthermore, a recent report from the Education Advisory Board (EAB) explains, “A large rise in the proportion of underrepresented minority high school graduates will permanently change the undergraduate enrollment base. About 75 percent of the net increase in total enrollment over the next eleven years will come from Black and Hispanic students. By the 2019–2020 academic year, 45 percent of public high school graduates will be non-white, compared to 38 percent in the class of 2009” (“Future Students, Future Revenues” 2013).

On the one hand, these statistics about who will be enrolling in college underscore the need for our programs to carefully consider transfer credit policies and methods for engaging those learners returning to complete a degree as well as international undergraduates who may be studying a third, fourth, or even fifth language, according to EAB projections about “potential growth segments” (2013).

On the other hand, the changes in the age and ethnic profile of the student population are inextricably linked to the calls for justice and reform on our campuses. Spanish programs
and foreign language departments are exceptionally equipped to offer a curriculum-centered academic response by the very nature of what we do. In many instances foreign language departments have been greatly diversified by the addition of NTT colleagues who reflect the shifting student population.

With regards to curriculum specifically, the “21st Century Skills World Languages Map” that resulted from the “Partnership for 21st Century Skills” makes clear that FL study fosters not only the communication and cultural competencies necessary for college success and productive, inclusive community engagement; but also, relevant and invaluable multicultural proficiencies marketable in the globalized economy. Raquel Oxford (2010) emphasized that the skills “must form part of the conversation as modifications move forward in the language curriculum” (68).

As students and academic institutions seek to engage more meaningfully across differences, FL programs achieve learning outcomes perfectly aligned with constructive dialogue and skills that function to promote understanding in and beyond a Spanish classroom. Faculty and departments need to be attentive to changes in enrollments, not just in numerical terms; but also, with regards to person and disposition. The recent turmoil at colleges and universities nationwide signals an urgency to develop, practice, and apply (in as many languages as possible) the skill sets outlined by “Partnership for 21st Century Skills.”

WORKS CITED


