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Present and a Vision for the Future**

Emily Spinelli

American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese

***Hispania* 100.5 (2017): 9–12**

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The AATSP: A Snapshot of the Present and a Vision for the Future



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American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese

On December 29, 1917 some 130 individuals gathered at the College of the City of New York for the first annual meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish. A terrible blizzard was underway in New York City that day and many attendees arrived late. The early founders of the organization had planned well and even with the difficult weather conditions, the meeting went on as scheduled and four papers were presented. In his history of the first seventy-five years of the AATSP, Richard B. Klein remarked, “It is worthwhile noting that the AATS was born at a difficult time of year, under egregious weather conditions, and at the height of World War I” (Klein 1992: 1037).

Despite this difficult and inauspicious beginning, the AATS moved forward with its “devotion to things Hispanic” (Klein 1992: 1037) and its mission “to enhance the place of Spanish in the curriculum of the entire country” (Klein 1992: 1040). Membership began to increase, the size of the annual meeting expanded, and new member services were initiated. However, the next major development for the organization did not occur until December 1944 when Portuguese faculty members were admitted as members and the name of the organization became the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP).

These beginning years of the AATSP can be viewed as a metaphor for the hundred-year history of the organization as well as inspiration for the future. From its beginnings, through the middle years of the twentieth-century, and into the new millennium, the AATSP faced financial downturns, grim political situations, and challenging circumstances for the teaching of world languages. Because of the vision and determination of the membership and leadership, the AATSP expanded and became a model for other language-specific organizations.

The present-day AATSP owes much of its success to the period of the late 1950s through the 1990s when the AATSP underwent tremendous growth and added programs and activities. After a financial downturn and decline in membership in the early years of the twenty-first century, the AATSP today is again financially stable, has a growing membership base topping 10,000, and has an increasing number of successful programs and publications.

The following overview of the various programs and publications of the AATSP provides a snapshot of the organization in its centennial year and offers suggestions for continued progress.

Membership and Member Benefits

The demographic changes that occurred in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s caused a major shift in the education system and society as a whole by replacing policies involving uniformity and “one size fits all” with policies reflecting individualization and “the customer is always right” (Spinelli 2004). Professional organizations that continued with a one-size-fits-all

approach to their programming began to face declining membership. This latter trend was well documented in Sarah L. Sladek's book *The End of Membership as We Know It* (2011) in which the author provided recommendations for organizations to maintain or improve membership numbers in a new reality.

In order to attract new and retain current members, the AATSP has focused on increasing the number of member benefits without increasing dues and offering a greater variety of programs to appeal to more individuals. The AATSP currently offers a wide selection of professional development opportunities including the annual conference, webinars, scholarships and travel stipends for study abroad, as well as numerous events at the chapter level. Over the last decade the AATSP has created new publications in both print and digital format and improved the quality of the existing publications. The number of AATSP programs has increased and now includes National Portuguese Examinations, National Spanish Examinations, Online Classroom Resources, Phi Lambda Beta, Poster Contest, Sociedad Honoraria Hispánica, and the Sociedad Hispánica de Amistad.

Notwithstanding the expansion in the number of programs and publications, the AATSP still faces two membership challenges: the need to continually attract new members and the need to establish a membership that is more or less equally divided between those at the K–12 level and those at the post-secondary level. In order to replace those members who retire and do not continue with the organization, the AATSP must attract millennials, those born between 1982 and 1995 and who are now in the early stages of their careers.¹ The AATSP has incorporated technology and social media throughout the organization in an effort to reach out to millennials. Communication with the membership is handled through email messages, the website, and Facebook and Twitter; publications are offered in print and digital versions, social media allows members to interact and network with one another, and webinars offer professional development opportunities beyond those of the annual conference. For the future, the AATSP will need to constantly incorporate new technologies and train the membership to utilize these new technologies in the classroom.

Prior to the year 2000 the AATSP was composed largely of post-secondary members and the programs and publications of the organization for the most part reflected the college/university perspective. Today, however, the majority of the AATSP members teach at the K–12 level and more specifically at the secondary (9–12) level.² Since the AATSP is designed for all educators, there is clearly a need to attract more post-secondary members in order for membership to be more or less equally representative of the K–12 levels and post-secondary levels. To that end, the AATSP has engaged in new initiatives such as the recently created Graduate Student Department Membership category and the expanded travel stipend program for attendance at the annual conference. As two-year institutions continue to grow and employ more faculty members and four-year institutions rely more on adjunct teaching faculty in language departments, the AATSP needs to create member benefits for those two groups so that they are more inclined to join the organization.

Annual Conference

As the use of technology increased within the AATSP and other organizations, some specialists in the field began to predict that online webinars and networking would replace face-to-face conferences (Holub 2015). Other specialists felt that face-to-face conferences could continue if the very nature of these conferences could change in order to appeal to the younger members (Martin Pascual 2015; Sladek 2011). Despite predictions to the contrary, the AATSP annual conference has been able to survive and even prosper by instituting changes that enhance the traditional face-to-face annual meeting. Since 2002 the conference has alternated between sites in the United States and sites in Spanish-speaking or Portuguese-speaking countries. Thus, in general, AATSP members have the opportunity to go abroad for professional development every

two years. When the conference is located within the United States, the selected conference site must offer immersion and cultural experiences for conference attendees. These domestic and international sites provide numerous opportunities for sessions, workshops and excursions whose intent is to improve the language and cultural proficiency of the attendees.

Publications

During the last decade the publications of the AATSP have evolved with the times in order to remain up-to-date and beneficial. *Hispania*, the highly acclaimed research journal of the AATSP, has undergone several important changes. The cover and interior layout were redesigned; sections related to news for and about the profession were moved to the website; the range of topics covered in the journal expanded significantly and special focus issues appear with frequency. In 2015 the AATSP launched *Spanish and Portuguese Review*, a graduate student journal designed to foster research by graduate students and help them learn editing and other skills related to the publication process. Other AATSP publications include *Announcements and Reminders* that is sent to the membership in digital format every two to three weeks throughout the year; *The Portuguese Newsletter*, a print bulletin for the Portuguese membership that appears twice per year; *Albricias*, the high school student journal of the Sociedad Honoraria Hispánica; and the *Conference Wrap-Up*, a photographic record of the annual conference. The AATSP publications remain highly valued because the editors and editorial boards of these publications strive to keep their publications relevant and useful.

Partnerships and Internationalization

In the current climate, organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to survive by relying solely on their own programs and activities. By forming partnerships with other organizations and institutions with a similar mission, organizations can increase their member benefits and consequently, the number of members. Over the past decade the AATSP has formed numerous new partnerships, signed new MOUs and agreements, and gained new scholarships. In addition to the long-standing agreement with the Embassy of Spain for scholarships and professional development opportunities, the AATSP has signed agreements with the Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española (ANLE) for conference sessions; Global Professional Search for career postings and opportunities; New Mexico State University for graduate credit related to conference participation; Santillana USA for webinars and the printing of the conference program; the University of Salamanca for its international programs; and most recently, the Asociación Enseñanza Bilingüe for the promotion of second language acquisition and bilingual programs.

The AATSP also advocates for Spanish and Portuguese programs by working with organizations such as the Federación Internacional de Asociaciones de Profesores de Español (FIAPE); the Joint National Committee for Languages-National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS); the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations (NFMLTA) and the National Standards Collaborative.

It should be pointed out that many of these partnerships are international in scope and through these collaborative efforts the AATSP has gained international recognition and stature. Language organizations outside the United States now look to the AATSP for guidance and support in strengthening their language programs. The AATSP is well poised for the future in an environment where globalization and internationalization have become increasingly more important.

Conclusion

Since its founding a hundred years ago, the AATSP has always responded to challenges and survived setbacks through determination and effort. The vision and careful planning of the early leaders of the organization paved the way for the expansion and growth of the latter half of the twentieth century and helped the organization survive its downturn in the early part of this century. Likewise, the recent growth in membership and the innovations in programs, publications, and activities should guide the AATSP into its second century where it will continue to flourish. It is hoped that the initial mission of the organization “to enhance the place of Spanish in the curriculum of the entire country” will become an expanded reality in which the AATSP enhances the teaching and learning of Spanish and Portuguese on an international scale.

NOTES

¹Millennials are generally described as a racially and ethnically diverse generation that is optimistic, technology-driven, open to change and self-interested. At the same time, millennials are often depicted as reluctant to join organizations because those organizations do not appear to be open to change and do not offer the member benefits that millennials seek (Howe and Strauss 2000).

²Programs such as the Sociedad Honoraria Hispánica and the National Spanish Examinations were largely responsible for the shift in membership levels as high school teachers joined the organization in order to have their students participate in those programs.

³The Graduate Student Department Membership category allows language departments to pay a nominal fee so that all the graduate students in Spanish or Portuguese within the department can become members of the organization.

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