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to Meet Diverse Student Needs

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RESPONSE

Graduate Programs of the Future:
Diversification and Professionalization

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The Evolution of Future Spanish Graduate Programs to Meet Diverse Student Needs

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Abstract: As the 2007 report from the Modern Language Association attested, foreign language departments must undergo radical structural changes in order to meet student needs in a changed world. The implications of this report (e.g., to broaden the curriculum beyond the study of literature, linguistics, and culture to include courses with other disciplinary content [history, economics, business, medicine]) have been implemented by some university language programs at the undergraduate level (e.g., Byrnes, Maxim, and Norris 2010) but mostly have been ignored by graduate programs. The effects of the dearth of foreign language graduate programs encouraging graduate students to engage in interdisciplinary research and teaching with faculty and students in other departments is seen in the literature on Languages for Specific Purposes in the United States (Lafford 2012), briefly reviewed here. This essay envisions the evolution of Spanish graduate programs that incorporate interdisciplinary approaches and professional training into their curriculum to meet diverse graduate student needs (i.e., preparing them for careers inside/outside of academe, training them to start professional languages programs, allowing heritage learners of Spanish to leverage their linguistic/cultural expertise, and providing opportunities for them to forge community partnerships to improve the quality of life of the people they will serve).

Keywords: curriculum/currículo, graduate education/educación graduada, higher education/educación superior, Language for Specific Purposes/lenguas para fines específicos, Spanish/español

Introduction

The 2007 report from the Modern Language Association (MLA) stated that foreign language (FL) departments must undergo radical structural changes in order to meet student needs in a changed world. The implications of this report (e.g., to broaden the FL curriculum beyond the study of literature, linguistics, and culture to include courses with other disciplinary content [history, economics, business, medicine]) have been implemented by some university language programs at the undergraduate level (e.g., Byrnes, Maxim, and Norris 2010) but have been ignored for the most part by graduate programs.

In 2012, the MLA Executive Council set up a task force to consider specific ways in which doctoral programs in modern languages and literatures could be transformed to meet the needs of future graduate students in these areas. The report of this task force (MLA 2014a) included the following recommendations: redesign the doctoral program to align more closely with student needs, provide opportunities for students to engage with technology at a deeper level for teaching and research purposes, strengthen teacher preparation, expand opportunities for professionalization to acquire skills for obtaining employment, provide students with information about the range of careers available to doctoral students, and support their choices of employment in both academic and non-academic venues.
This essay envisions the evolution of Spanish graduate programs that incorporate this type of professional training into the curriculum to meet diverse graduate student needs. The essay will focus on how Spanish graduate programs can 1) prepare students for careers inside/outside of academe; 2) train graduate students to create professional languages programs to serve the Latino community in the United States; 3) encourage graduate students who are heritage learners (HLs) of Spanish to leverage their linguistic/cultural expertise; and 4) provide opportunities for the graduate students to participate in internships and community service-learning (CSL) opportunities to further their own professional development and to improve the quality of life of the community they will serve.

In order to provide an academic (insider) view of the type of professional training Spanish graduate students currently receive and should be receiving, preliminary results from a survey of selected US Spanish graduate programs will be presented. A survey was sent to the top sixty Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature graduate programs in the United States, ranked by PhDS.org and available at http://www.phds.org/rankings/spanish. Out of sixty survey solicitations, thirty-seven institutions responded (a 62% rate of return). Most respondents (76%, 16/21) were from large state universities (20,000 students or more) with a research focus (57%, 12/21). In addition to suggestions made by the survey respondents, proposals for the evolution of future Spanish graduate programs made by the author and other scholars in the field will be incorporated in the discussion below.

Preventing for Careers Inside and Outside Academe

Training for Academic Positions

Current training for academic positions primarily focuses on imparting research skills to graduate students to become scholars and providing pedagogical training for them to teach university FL classes. For instance, 60% (15/25) of respondents reported that their institutions offered a graduate level research methods course (more often in linguistics [87%, 13/15], a field requiring an understanding of empirical research design and statistical analysis, than in literature [40%, 6/15] or cultural studies [33%, 5/15]).

In addition, almost all responding Spanish graduate programs seem to provide both training and opportunities for students to teach undergraduate Spanish courses. Ninety two percent (23/25) of responding institutions offer such training, that most often took the form of a graduate teaching methods course (95%, 21/22) or some form of semester-long in-service training (82%, 18/22). However, only 18% (4/22) provided graduate students with the kind of on-going in-service pedagogical training suggested by Lord (2014).

In addition to providing pedagogical training for Spanish graduate students, 96% (24/25) of respondents stated that these students have an opportunity to teach lower-division language courses and 83% (19/23) reported that their graduate students teach upper-division language, literature, culture, and linguistics courses. However, while all respondents stated that graduate students were trained to teach lower-division language courses, only 46% (10/22) reported that they received training to teach upper-division courses. Future Spanish graduate programs need to address this lacuna in pedagogical training. Moreover, 65% (15/23) of respondents said there was no training available to graduate students to teach courses in online environments, and 59% (13/22) reported no opportunities for graduate students to teach online courses; when opportunities to teach online exist, students are almost always (86%, 6/7) limited to teaching lower-division language courses.

Considering the encouragement that university administrations currently give to the creation of online courses and programs (Blake 2013) and the expansion of a job market that seeks to hire individuals trained and experienced in online language instruction, departments
should create intensive pre- and in-service training for graduate students who will be teaching online courses (Berber-McNeil 2015).

Training for Academic Administration Positions

University-level administrative positions commonly found in Spanish departments include the Language Program Director and directors of programs abroad. Although both positions are often occupied by Assistant Professors soon after they leave graduate school, 73% (16/22) of respondents said their program offered no specific training to become Language Program Directors and 64% (14/22) noted no opportunity for practical experience in this area. Respondents also noted that 82% (18/22) of programs offer no training to become study abroad directors and 59% (13/22) offer no practical experience to assume those positions. Graduate programs concerned with preparing their students for these administrative positions should create practical pre- and in-service training workshops or courses and provide practical resources for administering such programs (e.g., Lord 2014; Lord and Isabelli-García 2014).

Training for Academic Job Searches

Seventy-eight percent (28/36) of the respondents to the survey noted that specific training for obtaining academic employment mostly takes the form of workshops on job seeking, grant writing, publishing, and giving conference papers; only a few programs (28%, 9/33) reported having a full graduate-level course on this type of professional preparation.

Training for Non-academic Positions

As the Modern Language Association (MLA, 2014b) noted a decline in the number of advertisements for tenure-track FL jobs, graduate programs must also prepare their students for alternative careers outside academe. However, 94% (29/31) of the respondents stated that their graduate program offered no career preparation for those positions (e.g., K–12 sector, publishing, and government, public or private sector jobs). To remedy this situation, graduate programs must create units in graduate-level professional courses or several in-service workshops on various practical job-search topics. In addition, graduate programs should seek to enroll their students in university-wide professionalization initiatives (e.g., preparing future faculty programs), and in courses that will enhance their technological abilities (e.g., digital humanities, computer-assisted language learning).

The Need for Interdisciplinarity

One of the most important skills to impart to graduate students for careers inside and outside of academe is how to work with people from other fields on a common project. The MLA (2007) report noted the need to integrate more interdisciplinarity into graduate language programs to deepen students’ understanding of the interconnectedness of global communities and meet the needs of a changed, post-911 world. However, the survey respondents reported that most Spanish graduate PhD tracks and courses still focus on literature (92%, 24/26), cultural studies (77%, 20/26), and linguistics (73%, 19/26). Although more than half (52%, 13/25) of responding programs stated that their PhD program offered interdisciplinary tracks requiring courses taken from other language units or other departments, most of those courses were in fields related to languages, cultural studies, and linguistics (e.g., education, cognitive science, film, gender studies). None of the survey respondents noted any interdisciplinary graduate tracks that united
graduate language studies with fields not commonly associated with the study of language and culture (e.g., medicine, law, business).

Training in Languages for Specific Purposes

The effects of the dearth of FL graduate programs encouraging students to engage in interdisciplinary research and teaching is seen in the lack of courses and tracks in Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) in graduate programs in the United States (Lafford 2012). Respondents to the survey reported that 76% (19/25) of graduate programs did not offer any graduate-level courses on LSP research or pedagogy and that 70% (16/23) failed to offer any pedagogical LSP training. Survey data also stated that 61% (14/23) of responding institutions did not offer opportunities for graduate students to teach undergraduate LSP courses, but when they did, they taught a mixture of lower-division and upper-division courses focused on medical, business, and legal fields.

One area of LSP, translation and interpretation studies, was mentioned in the MLA (2007) and (2014) reports as being an important disciplinary focus in restructured FL departments. Nonetheless, current Spanish graduate programs reported in the survey that 68% (17/25) offer no graduate level translation and interpretation studies programs; when offered, these courses focus more on translation (44% [translation pedagogy, 4/9]–56% [translation research], 5/9) than on interpretation pedagogy and research (22%, 2/9).

In addition, none of the programs offered graduate students training to teach undergraduate translation and interpretation courses and 87% (20/23) offered no opportunities for them to teach those courses. When graduate students did teach translation and interpretation courses, the focus was on medical, legal, and business topics. Institutions that do not offer translation and interpretation courses do their undergraduate and graduate students a great disservice, as these skills are highly sought after by employers (King de Ramírez and Lafford 2017).

Graduate programs should answer the call for more research in LSP/translation and interpretation studies by creating graduate and undergraduate courses and tracks in these areas that can train graduate students to become professional LSP/translation and interpretation scholars and practitioners (Colina 2003; Lafford 2012; Long 2013; Ruggiero 2014). This training will allow graduate students to choose careers in which they can create LSP/translation and interpretation programs in both academic and non-academic settings.

Need for LSP Graduate Faculty

The small number of LSP graduate courses and programs in the United States may be due to the lack of graduate faculty trained in LSP research and pedagogy. Several scholars (Lafford 2012; Long and Uscinski 2012; Sánchez-López 2010; Sánchez-López, Long, and Lafford 2017) have attributed this to the lack of prestige such programs currently hold in academe, fear of change on the part of established faculty in traditional areas (literature, cultural studies), and the relative lack of established venues for professional presentations and peer-reviewed publications in the field of (non-English) LSP in the US (as opposed to other parts of the world where English for Specific Purposes has an extensive research base [Lafford 2012]). When asked in the survey if language departments should create more tenure-track positions for LSP scholars, 71% (15/21) and 62% (13/21) (respectively) responded affirmatively.

As bureaucracies change slowly, the formation of a substantial number of tenure-track and tenured LSP scholars may take several years to develop. Therefore, the quickest route to professionalization of these fields would be for tenured professors to take on the responsibility of training themselves and publishing on LSP topics in established prestigious journals (Sánchez-López 2010). This initiative will allow scholars to begin to expand the LSP research base in short order. These same scholars can then create graduate-level LSP research and pedagogy courses and tracks and encourage their students to pursue research in these areas.
Leveraging Linguistic/Cultural Expertise of Heritage Learners of Spanish

According to Beaudrie, Ducar, and Potowski (2014), as today's language classrooms are becoming increasingly populated by HLs, all FL teachers should receive training in how to help these students leverage their linguistic and cultural knowledge in academic settings. However, even though 41% (9/22) of respondents stated that their programs gave graduate students the opportunity to teach undergraduate HL courses, 58% (14/24) of survey respondents said their department did not train graduate students to teach those courses. In addition, where such training existed, it was mostly focused on lower-division courses and was more often in the form of workshops (67%, 6/9) than in graduate coursework (56%, 5/9). Future graduate programs will need to implement more training for teaching HLs in the pedagogical preparation received by all graduate students.

As noted by King de Ramírez and Lafford (2017), heritage learners make excellent candidates for community internships and are especially welcome in healthcare settings where high levels of language proficiency and cultural sensitivity are vital to the success of doctor–patient interactions. In order to interest more undergraduate HLs in graduate-level LSP/CSL opportunities, graduate directors should recruit HLs into graduate tracks in linguistics, sociolinguistics, SLA, and applied linguistics, fields which all inform LSP translation and interpretation research and pedagogy.

In addition, HL graduate students with academic backgrounds in all language-related areas should be encouraged to take LSP/translation and interpretation graduate courses to familiarize themselves with fields in which they could leverage their linguistic and cultural expertise both inside and outside of academe. Moreover, graduate courses and tracks in Heritage Language research and pedagogy need to be created to help form generations of professors from HL backgrounds who can serve as role models for HL students.

Forging University-Community Partnerships for Professional Development

As attested by several LSP scholars (King de Ramírez and Lafford 2017; Lafford, Abbott, and Lear 2014), the forging of university-community partnerships to provide opportunities for internships/CSL is crucial to the professional formation of language students for professions in which they will interact with and serve the Latinx community in the United States. However, most programs lack internship/CSL opportunities for graduate students; 82% (18/22) of respondents reported that their program did not offer internships to graduate students. Nevertheless, 80% (16/20) believed that language departments should forge more community partnerships to benefit their Spanish graduate students, whose high levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency can also be a true asset to community partners.

In addition, graduate students can use internship/CSL opportunities to collect data and expand the LSP/translation and interpretation/HL research base in areas deemed to be priorities by LSP professionals (Lafford 2013; Sánchez-López, Long, and Lafford 2017): heritage language development, identity formation, development of social networks, and assessment of language skills in experiential language learning contexts (e.g., internship/CSL settings).

Changes Needed in Graduate Programs to Meet Diverse Student Needs

In an open-ended survey question on changes needed to current Spanish graduate programs to meet diverse student needs, respondents stated that fewer graduate courses/tracks were needed in traditional literature and culture fields and more innovative course offerings were needed in research methods, linguistics, applied linguistics, SLA, advanced teaching methods, technology, language program direction, HL studies/bilingualism, LSP/translation and interpretation, Spanish composition, and visual studies/film. Respondents also noted the need for more training on professionalism (e.g., job interview training, grant writing, professional ethics, time management,
preparation for academic conferences and interviews), L2 and HL pedagogy, research and publishing, women in academe, digital humanities, non-tenure track and tenure-track jobs in academe, and careers outside of academe.

Conclusions

The vision shared by many survey respondents regarding the evolution of future Spanish graduate programs to meet diverse student needs reflects suggestions made by the MLA (2007; 2014) and serves as a call to action for restructuring programs to include more practical and professional content. In general, professionals in the field indicated that the current research and pedagogical preparation provided for academic careers needs to be complemented by training for new interdisciplinary academic fields (LSP, translation and interpretation, HL), online pedagogy, administrative positions, and non-academic careers in which linguistic and cultural skills are required. In addition, future Spanish graduate programs need to create new courses/tracks in various areas of applied linguistics (LSP, translation and interpretation, HL studies) that will provide training for a wide variety of language-related careers.

Part of this future vision includes recognition of the important role that training in HL research and pedagogy must play in future Spanish graduate programs. Programs that actively recruit HLs and help them leverage their linguistic and cultural expertise to enhance their employment opportunities will be instrumental in preparing Latinx students for leadership positions in a variety of academic and non-academic careers. In addition, Spanish graduate programs need to create and maintain thriving university-community partnerships that can provide opportunities for graduate students to further their professional development and research and employment opportunities.

In sum, Spanish graduate programs of the future need to provide more practical professional training for all graduate students including for jobs inside and outside of academe. Professionals from the community should be invited to talk with graduate students about the skill sets needed in various fields seeking to recruit individuals with high levels of Spanish proficiency and a deep understanding of US Latino culture. In this way, Spanish graduate programs can help their students broaden their career aspirations to include employment possibilities that will positively impact Latinx communities that exist and thrive beyond the confines of traditional academic walls.

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NOTES

1 Beaudrie, Ducar, and Potowski (2014) adopt Valdés's (2000) definition of a heritage learner as an individual who “is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken. The student may speak or merely understand the heritage language and be, to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language” (1), which they propose to be an appropriate definition of HLs for research in educational contexts.

2 PhDS.org, is a well-respected source of information on current graduate programs that compiles data from the National Research Council, Survey of Earned Doctorates, and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to create its rankings.

3 As not all respondents answered each question in the survey, the number of respondents to given questions will be provided throughout the data discussion.

4 Räsänen and Fortanet-Gómez (2008) offer the following definition: “ESP [LSP] teaching uses the methodologies and activities of the various disciplines it is designed to serve, and it focuses on the language, lexis, grammar, discourses, and genres of those disciplines rather than using the general grammar, learners’ dictionaries and general public genres and discourses” (12).
WORKS CITED


Response to “The Evolution of Future Graduate Programs to Meet Diverse Student Needs”

Graduate Programs of the Future: Diversification and Professionalization

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Keywords: canon, curriculum/currículo, higher education/educación superior, graduate education/programas graduados, Spanish/español, student needs/necesidades de estudiantes

The essay “The Evolution of Future Graduate Programs to Meet Diverse Student Needs” builds on MLA reports that called for restructuring foreign language departments (2007) and doctoral programs (2014). Changes are necessary so that students can find jobs after earning a degree. Graduate students are still being prepared for tenure-track academic positions, even though these positions have been drastically reduced. Instead, students should be given a skill set that prepares them for academic and non-academic jobs of the future. Lafford marshals evidence to support the MLA’s recommendations, including published studies and selected responses to a questionnaire sent to Spanish graduate departments. All evidence points to a troubling dilemma: despite consensus about the need for change, very little is being done to revamp Spanish graduate programs. Addressing this inaction, the essay envisions specific changes in two crucial areas: training students to teach and lead language programs, and training them to succeed in other fields that draw on their knowledge base.

Diversification and professionalization are the two overarching goals that, in my view, should be our mission statement for graduate programs of the future. These goals encompass the visionary essay’s practical suggestions, from preparing students to teach online courses to forging community partnerships that help graduates work with Latinos in the United States. All of these recommendations are in keeping with those that emerged from an AATSP-sponsored MLA panel entitled “What Do Graduate Students in Spanish Need to Learn, and Why?” (Brown). Other valuable panel recommendations addressed pedagogical and disciplinary issues that are not covered in this essay. They include the need for exposure to literary history in a cultural context, the need for a foundational disciplinary canon, the need for training in humanities teaching as well as language instruction, the need for mentoring in the areas of teaching and administration, and the need for socialization and mentoring of students by professional organizations.¹

Graduate programs must diversify and differentiate based on their own mission and resources. Opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement with Spanish speakers will vary from institution to institution—making the “one-size-fits-all” model obsolete. Differentiation also must occur for specific cohorts of students. All will agree that MA graduates constitute a separate population from PhDs, and the training and placement of each must be tailored accordingly. MA-level learners benefit from programmatic breadth, while PhD-level students profit from specialization. Both groups deserve coursework that is relevant to their interests. They are also entitled to gain transferable skills in the areas of research methods, teaching, and administration.
In order to sustain our graduate programs as well as our discipline, professionalization must be enacted internally as well as through external links with other fields. To enhance our own professionalism and preempt external oversight, I believe that graduate programs should take the lead in outcomes assessment. This is already done in the area of language proficiency. Many Spanish programs mandate the same ACTFL OPI level for graduate students as is required for teachers in most of the United States, currently Advanced Low. A similar content certification, demonstrating exposure to a fundamental set of canonical cultural landmarks, would elevate the status of the MA credential that we confer.

The need for change in Spanish graduate education has been recognized for decades: “If we don’t do something different from the way we’ve been doing things, if we don’t change, adapt, realign ourselves, we’re doomed” warned one contributor to a 1972 AATSP report (Kronik). The essay “The Evolution of Future Graduate Programs” delivers positive news: the notion that change is necessary has become accepted wisdom. What remains is for us to define and execute needed reforms. My own vision of the future, which is aligned with the vision of this essay, is predicated on diversification and professionalization.

NOTE

1 Participants included Joan L. Brown, Emily C. Francomano, Sheri Spaine Long, Randolph D. Pope, and Roberta Johnson.

WORKS CITED