

Academic Program Review
Spanish MA Program
Sonoma State University
(School of Extended Education)

External Reviewer Report

Prepared and submitted by

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REVIEWER QUALIFICATIONS

The Spanish M.A. Program Director, Dr. Parissa Tadrissi, extended an invitation to serve as an external reviewer and I accepted based on following:

- An academic and scholarly preparation as an MA in Spanish Linguistics and Literatures, and PhD in Spanish Linguistics;
- 30+ years of teaching every level of courses in Spanish language along with undergraduate and graduate courses in applied linguistics and foreign language teaching methodology;
- On-going record of research and publications in applied linguistics and language program management;
- Administrative experiences including having served for three years on the University Promotion and Tenure Committee, seven years as Chair of the Department of World Languages and Literatures at the University of Nevada, Reno and, twelve years as Basic Spanish Language Program Director in the Spanish program.
- As department chair, my portfolio includes college academic program reviews, faculty evaluations, assessment, budget, space allocation and improvement, and building infrastructure among other duties.
- Member of the American Association of University Supervisors and Coordinators of Language Programs (AAUSC).
- Member of a department for the last 20 years that offers nine language programs, two BAs (French and Spanish), four minors (Arabic, Chinese, Italian, and Japanese), a Spanish MA program, and two two-year language programs (German, Paiute, and Portuguese).

INTRODUCTION

Criteria used for this evaluation include best practices, guidelines, and standards associated with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), American Council on Teaching Foreign Language (ACTFL), Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL), Modern Language Association (MLA), and best practices associated with higher education assessment.

I would like to preface this report by thanking the SSU graduate students, the graduate faculty (Dr. Emily Clark, Dr. Parissa Tadrissi, and Dr. Robert Train), the Spanish MA Program Director (Dr. Tadrissi), and administrators (Dean Hollis Robbins and Interim AVP Stacey Bosick) who met with me via Zoom on September 22 and 23, 2021 and to the faculty who wrote the self-study report. I also note that despite the materials provided and the opportunity to virtually visit with SSU, my knowledge of the campus culture is only partial; some decisions may be driven by conditions or constraints of which I am not aware.

I found many positive aspects in the Spanish MA program. Evidence from the visit and self-study report demonstrates that the graduate faculty members are well-prepared and dedicated professors, and that the quality of the individual graduate courses is high. Based on the learning outcomes assessments, graduate students appear to be developing general knowledge in Hispanic linguistics, literatures, cultures, and pedagogy and general skills in critical thinking and research.

Faculty members should be commended on their curriculum and attention to the students.

Based on the self-study report and on observations from my conversations with the program members, the graduate Spanish MA program at SSU is exemplary in its quality, content, sequencing, and advising. However, I have identified several areas that should be addressed as soon as possible. My recommendations are as follows:

1. to better support the graduate teaching associates' (TAs) teaching in the undergraduate Spanish program, the work of the TA supervisor needs to be formally defined and created. That role needs fall under the responsibility of teaching (and not service).
2. facilitate enrollment in the MA program for those students graduating with a BA but do not yet possess a diploma: the graduate director reports that due to issues with *Cal State Apply* applications processing program, students can apply but cannot start the program until their diploma is processed. As reported by the Program Director, this is impossible to do at the moment since the MA program starts in June and the diploma is processed at a later time. This application system hampers facilitated enrollment in the program.
3. develop a strategic vision for improving the research, instructional, and outreach missions of your program over the next seven years and include it in the program's self-study. Identify aspirational but realistic goals that could be achieved with and without additional resources.

MISSION

SSU is recognized as having a mission of sufficient scope to enable it to be a distinguished arts and sciences university that delivers high-quality education through innovative programs where their Strategic Priority 2 reports an outstanding teacher education program. It recognizes the importance and complementary relationship of teaching and research followed by enrichment of instruction via field experience/independent study and development of the life of the university community. The mission and goals reported in the self-study are largely consonant with those of the university:

The Master of Arts in Spanish program at SSU is an attractive and competitive graduate program in language, literature, and cultures. Among the program's strengths are its broad approach to curriculum, flexible electives, and a unique practicum/internship component. The program requires its students to study at least three courses in literature, two in linguistics, one in pedagogy, and provides a mentored teaching practicum or internship experience; students are able to pursue curricular interests in greater depth by taking a least 2 units of additional elective courses.

The program student learning outcomes are the following:

Upon completion of the program, it is anticipated that all students will be:

1. prepared (both in curricular and pedagogical terms) to teach any course in Spanish language, literature, or culture in secondary schools, community colleges, or among lower-division university courses;
2. able to submit a competitive application to regionally or nationally recognized PhD programs in either Hispanic literatures, linguistics, or pedagogy;
3. conduct original research on topics in applied or theoretical linguistics in Spanish with a solid background in linguistic principles;

4. conduct original research on topics related to Hispanic culture with a solid grounding in the literary canon;
5. able to express themselves with a high level of accuracy and fluency in written and spoken Spanish in a variety of professional settings.

The goals listed in this mission and the expected SLOs align with best practices of master's programs in Spanish across the country. It is not clear, however, that the Spanish MA program is optimally supported to carry out this mission. The report will go on to identify some general issues. Recommendations regarding individual areas are incorporated under each header.

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

Although the mission statement of the program states an anticipated program outcome that the student will be “able to submit a competitive application to regionally or nationally recognized PhD program...” (2) and of the ability “to express themselves with a high level of accuracy and fluency in written and spoken Spanish in a variety of professional settings” (5), neither are reflected in the assessment plan. Additionally, although the program has successfully structured a sequence of courses that develops general knowledge in Hispanic linguistics, literature, and culture, this content knowledge is missing from the program SLOs. I recommend the faculty to revisit the program outcomes and modify the assessment plan where needed.

CURRICULUM

The innovative approach of offering the MA through Extended Studies during the summer months affords the program and institution the ability to offer a high-quality Spanish MA program during non-contract days where 50% of the faculty are invited visiting professors from national institutions. This setup allows the students to be exposed to a diverse range of expertise while at the same time offering a cost-effective program to the students and SSU. Additionally, the program has successfully structured a sequence of courses that develops general knowledge in Hispanic linguistics, literature, pedagogy, and culture.

The graduate students with whom I met spoke provided laudatory comments of the program and faculty and offered many positive comments. Although they praised the individual faculty members, the quality of the curriculum, the format of the summer intensive program, and the attention they received from the program director, one curricular issue lay with the apparent emphasis in the program on preparing high school and community college teachers.

Although the self-study reports that the student will be “able to submit a competitive application to regionally or nationally recognized PhD programs in either Hispanic literatures, linguistics, or pedagogy” (2), a few students, who were PhD oriented, mentioned that the current program would have served them better in this aspect if there was a thesis option in the MA program. With this thesis, they felt that they would be able to submit a better PhD program application. Based on the self-study document, only two course descriptions mention the required completion of a research project: SPAN 502: Advanced Linguistics and SPAN 503: Practical Linguistics. However, in the assessment section of the report, it does state that there is/are “research paper(s) due at the end of each course”. Additionally, graduate students are encouraged to participate in the annual Graduate Student hosted Conference. All these projects would provide the graduate students ample opportunities to provide a writing sample for a strong PhD application. Although

it appears that there are plenty of curricular opportunities for students to prepare materials through their courses, I recommend the consideration of including an opportunity for students to carry out a thesis option as an additional opportunity, which is a common, but not frequently used, feature in Spanish MA programs nationally.

In relation to preparing the student to be better qualified to enter a PhD program, the graduate students reported that there seemed to be a lack of interest in hosting and promoting the Graduate Student Conference on behalf of the MA Program faculty. This is supported in the self-study report, where it states the fact that the graduate students “have organized, hosted and presented at their own conference...is remarkable considering that they have had little support”. This does not seem to be a lack of faculty support, but rather some degree of disinvestment since conferences hosted by graduate students typically have minimal faculty support. However, since this conference is included as part of the self-study report when discussing curriculum, I recommend that faculty explore ways to support students even more with this conference, keeping in mind that they align with student expectations and faculty workload realities. The Spanish graduate program would be enhanced by offering more faculty support for student research activity. Not only does the conference prepare students to prepare a talk and consequentially prepare them for applying for PhD programs, but this research activity will also bring institutional and national visibility to the program. The upper administration, for example, was proud to mention this annual student conference.

GRADUATE TEACHING ASSOCIATES (TAs) AND SUPERVISION

The program mission reports that it “provides a mentored teaching practicum or internship experience”, however the absence of a formal mentor or supervisor for the TA(s) was not only an issue of concern of the faculty in the program, which is also presented in the self-study, but also by the graduate students. The self-study reports that “funding to support the teaching associates with regular meetings and pedagogical support is no longer available, and in the past was limited”. In order to better support the TAs teaching in the undergraduate Spanish program and to follow-best practices as described by the American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Language Programs (AAUSC), without language program supervisor guidance and oversight “it would be impractical, indeed unethical, and potentially harmful to the success of a department to offer undergraduate courses taught by novice teachers” (AAUSC, 2017)¹. Although the program has preferred to offer TA positions to students who had significant pedagogical training so as to limit supervision, this practice disadvantages those who do not hold this experience. I recommend that the position of TA supervisor be formally created and assigned.

Additionally, AAUSC states that supervisors should be compensated adequately given that “by definition the position requires a significant amount of invisible labor that often goes unrecognized or perceived as service” (2017). I recommend that the work of the TA supervisor be counted as teaching/instructors on their role statement and not service. Additionally, the position should be compensated to reflect the time needed to properly train, support, and oversee the teaching associates. As reported in the self-study report, the supervisory “work has been done

¹ American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Language Programs. 2017. “AAUSC statement of Policy on the Hiring of Language Program Directors”. Retrieved 10/15/2021 from <http://AAUSC.org/Policy-on>

without any financial support for many years and to the detriment of the program”. Formalization of the position would in turn alleviate the extra workload that the Program Director has taken on.

Indirectly related to the graduate program, but directly related to the opportunities offered to the Spanish TAs, is the reported lack of upper-administration support to fund lower-division first-, second-, and heritage-language Spanish classes. Without these courses, there are few, if any, classes for TAs to teach in Spanish. Although budgetary issues and general education goals appear to be the reason for this lack of support, offering Spanish language courses, especially to heritage language speakers, serves the Hispanic population at SSU (36.8%) especially given the recent Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) designation. Spanish heritage language speakers usually possess well-developed oral communicative skills but lack in instruction focused on literacy and expanding their bilingual range (Potowski, 2003)³. Heritage-language courses contribute to formalizing writing and speaking skills, which this population typically lacks. The faculty members also report an interest of many prospective students in lower-division and heritage-language Spanish courses; that high student demand is coupled with high need and employability for students to be able to serve the Hispanic community. I recommend that the program explore ways to gather evidence of student interest and work with upper administration to show how offering such courses would not only benefit the Hispanic student population but also the general student population in preparing them for a bilingual career opportunity. Additionally, I recommend that the program explore ways on how funding for HSIs could fit into supporting the lower-division language program.

FACULTY

The Spanish MA program at SSU is served by a strong and well-qualified faculty. The students I met were unanimous in praising the commitment and dedication of faculty. As one of them noted, “I feel my professors know me, and they provide me with what I need”. They referred to their professors as very supportive and good advisers and mentors who were always willing to meet with them and discuss the subject matter and kept them informed of initiatives related to the discipline. One of the students applied for a PhD program saying that “I received a tremendous level of support from one of my professors when applying to a PhD program”. Overall, the students I met with were engaging individuals, proud of their linguistic progress and acquired cultural knowledge, excited about the graduate program experiences, and adamant that they valued studying in a program where the curriculum and professors consistently supported their academic successes. However, students appeared to share the faculty’s perceptions that the faculty is overworked and overwhelmed by the combined demands of teaching, research, and service. Some degree of stress is not unusual: professors everywhere comment on the challenges of balancing those three elements. For the SSU Spanish faculty who participate in this summer program, a time that this work is considered over-load, might take away time they need to spend on research. Also, particularly this year, without Dr. Reeder’s presence teaching and serving in the program, these stresses are augmented. I would recommend that the department receive a dedicated replacement hire for Dr. Reeder to alleviate this stress.

³ Potowski, K. (2003). Chicago’s Heritage Language Teacher Corps: A model for improving Spanish teacher development. *Hispania*, 86 (2), 302-311.

The faculty must be commended on servicing students who are mostly Latino and who are being prepared to serve the Latino community - an activity that they view as central to the mission of their program as well as that of the University. However, they express perceptions that their work in this area is not being recognized when it comes to allocation of resources, be it recognition of their workload via replacement positions, teaching associate funding, and/or the lack of funding for lower-division Spanish classes. It is not clear to me from my visit that these perceptions are accurate, at least currently. I encourage faculty members to communicate their concerns openly and to make their cases for resources, compensation, and recognition and to explore ways to work with and incorporate upper-administration priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, I would like to ask the faculty to explore ways to address the above-mentioned weaknesses and I make the following recommendations:

1. I recommend careful consideration and assessment of the program SLOs, along with considering how to augment PhD preparedness in the program. I believe that these recommendations will help also make graduate Spanish at SSU stronger to prepare the students better for their future endeavors, be it high school or community college instructors or candidates applying for PhD programs.
2. To better support the TAs teaching in the undergraduate Spanish program, I recommend that a TA supervisor needs to be formally created and defined in their role statement as a teaching responsibility and be properly compensated to reflect the time needed to properly train, support, and oversee the teaching associates. This will in turn alleviate the workload that the Program Director has taken on to accommodate these shortcomings.
3. To alleviate the burden placed on the SSU Spanish faculty with Dr. Reeder's one-year absence, I would recommend that the department receive a dedicated replacement hire for Dr. Reeder. The Spanish graduate program faculty members report well-enrolled graduate and undergraduate classes; however, the faculty report that a proper replacement position was not authorized to replace Dr. Jeffery Reeder during his temporary year-long absence, therefore creating hardships being placed on the faculty and the inability to staff well-enrolled undergraduate and graduate classes.
4. I would recommend faculty efforts to foster recognition of the Spanish MA program by exploring ways to market their successful program and showcase student work.
5. I would also recommend that the program work with the School of Extended Education and the School of Arts and Sciences to explore ways to increase TA funding to provide better financial support for more graduate students in the program: currently they have only one position.
6. I also recommend that the department of Modern Languages and Literatures Spanish undergraduate program explore how to grow support for offering lower-division and heritage language Spanish courses. Such offerings would support the HSI designation SSU holds. Indirectly, such offerings would then open more opportunities for the need for Spanish teaching associates in the graduate program.

In conclusion, despite the issues identified above, the graduate students, the program faculty, and upper administration with whom I met were very enthusiastic about the Spanish MA program. Spanish at SSU is an area with continued great potential—strong faculty, high local need, and high employability of graduates. Currently that potential is hampered by lack of financial

support, a situation that has kept the program from growing. Future success will depend on the ability to think outside of the box, to focus objectives that make best use of available resources, and to best serve the Hispanic/Latino student body and community.