

# Reevaluating Curricular Objectives Using Students' Perceived Needs: The Case of Three Language Programs

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**Abstract:** *Investigating students' needs in three foreign language departments in a liberal arts college setting, the present study aims to find (1) similarities and differences in language needs among students enrolled in Spanish, French, and German, and (2) the extent to which students' perceived needs match the mission the departments have defined for their respective language programs. Student needs encompass a variety of aspects, including their motivations to study the language, their perceptions of language skills, and their anticipated uses of the language. Results from this study suggest that there are indeed similarities and differences in students' perceived needs across languages. The similarities include students' emotional ties to the languages, their interest in acquiring communicative skills, and their plans in terms of using the languages for career purposes. Students, however, differ in both their perceptions of the language requirement and in the ways in which they use languages outside of the classroom. An interesting finding is that students use French and German more often with native speakers than Spanish students do. Based on the results of this study, several practical recommendations are made. These include improving the content of language courses, emphasizing the role of culture in language teaching, and linking language study to career preparation.*

## Introduction

The need to attract and maintain students in an era of declining enrollments has spurred a reevaluation of the role of lower-level language courses within foreign language departments. Foreign language departments are most often structured to reflect the traditional liberal arts mission, which emphasizes an appreciation and understanding of the canon of literature, culture, and intellectual thought. The bulk of instruction in these content areas is normally reserved for the upper-division courses. In contrast, language programs reflect a "skills orientation" and thus provide basic-level preparation. Language courses have not traditionally been seen as a source of significant intellectual content. However, in most institutions, the majority of students discontinue language study without ever enrolling in the upper-division courses that are seen to best fulfill the department's mission, and the number of students choosing traditional foreign language majors has been declining. For most students, the mission of the department will be communicated through the medium of lower-division courses that are the locus of the largest enrollments. For this reason, selection of the intellectual and cultural content of these courses becomes ever more compelling.

Clearly, there is a mandate to make lower-division courses as attractive as possible to students. In the modern institution, the success or failure of the department as a whole is often clearly affected by the enrollment in lower-division courses. But to what extent do we know

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what students are really looking for? Communicative language? Preparation for the study of literature and culture? Is there a conflict between the two? Do student needs differ from language to language? Most importantly, is there a way to meet student needs and enhance course enrollment while staying rooted in a department's overall mission?

Student input is a tool used to respond to specific needs, to design efficient teaching techniques, to review existing programs, and to build new ones. Although students' perceptions of their learning goals do not provide concrete curricular objectives, assessing these needs is an important step in both curriculum design and the definition of the goals of foreign language programs (Brown, 1995; Schmidt, 1981).

To find out what students expect from the study of foreign languages, this study targeted three language programs in a large private research university in the New York City area that has a strong tradition of granting doctoral degrees in the humanities. This institution's three largest language programs, Spanish, French and German, were targeted for this study. All three of the programs had recently undergone important curricular changes. The French program had recently been entirely restructured; it had revised the content of its introductory and intermediate language courses, introduced a communicative method, and started in-house training of French instructors. The Spanish program had revised the content of some of its courses and started using a communicative methodology, while the German program had introduced portfolio assessment into its fourth-semester course.

### Review of Related Literature

In an attempt to explain the nationwide decline in undergraduate enrollments in language programs such as French, German, and Russian (Brod & Huber, 1997; Garret, 1997), researchers have looked for clues that might explain why some language programs attract students while others see their enrollments decrease. For instance, a study by Siskin et al. (1996) examined student attitudes toward Spanish, Japanese, and French using Halliday's (1989; 1994) "functions": instrumental, aesthetic, and transformative. The first function, instrumental, refers to the use of language for a specific goal such as a career; the second, aesthetic, denotes that the language is used "for beauty," and the third, transformative, describes cases in which a learner seeks to change his or her view of the world through the study of language. The reported results concern only French and Spanish. Siskin et al. concluded that utility plays a role in language choice, and that both Spanish and French appear to be perceived as useful, albeit in different ways.

Compagnon (1997) discussed decreases in enrollments and consequently the decline in students' interest in "things French" in the United States. Attributing this

decline to the diminished influence of French thought and to the rise of identity politics in the United States, Compagnon argues that, unlike heritage languages (e.g., Spanish and Italian), the French language may not be seen by many as a way to raise self-esteem or/and empower their communities. In order to lessen the decline of enrollments in French courses in the United States, task forces have been created to promote the study of French (American Association of Teachers of French [AATF], 1996).

Viewpoints on the proper manner of responding both to declining enrollments and to the changing student population are emerging within the foreign language profession. Jedan (1998) suggests ways to increase enrollments in German courses by developing cross-departmental relationships and gearing introductory-level courses toward other areas of study. Di Donato (1998) recommends a checklist of strategies that includes developing courses to meet students' needs, organizing activities such as community outreach and interdepartmental projects, and building a consensus within departments for the promotion and the success of the language programs. Siskin (1998) feels that altering student perceptions of the French language through greater emphasis on cultural content — to help students learn more about speakers of French and to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds — is more appropriate than perpetuating the traditional French prescriptive grammar approach. Siskin argues that, because of cultural aspects such as the focus on grammar in French, as well as the status of French in both the United States and the francophone countries, promoting French by comparing it to Spanish is a mistake. In the United States, the former is a foreign language and the latter is a second language studied by 64.5% of American middle and high school students (Steinberg, 1998).

Garcia (1998) has advocated a new general strategy for language teaching in the United States. She argues for the development of new majors in emerging foreign languages and recommends shifting resources from traditional Eurocentric language programs, such as French, Spanish, and German, to newly growing language programs like Japanese and Chinese. A recent *New York Times* article suggested that language study in the United States should reflect the actual number of native speakers of various languages in the world. In that article, Steinberg (1998) quoted the director of the National Council of Organizations of Less Commonly Taught Languages, a Russian professor, as saying that the study of French and German in the United States is a matter of cultural habit, not logic.

The future of languages in the United States and the importance of language programs to the large undergraduate student population have brought foreign language departments to the forefront of curricular reform. Student input may help us shed some light on what the mission of

foreign language study could be.

The needs and motivations of foreign language students in a variety of settings have been investigated by several studies with the objective of redesigning course content and devising teaching methodology. In one study, Guntermann et al. (1996) found that most French and Spanish students perceived the study of language as important for their education and that French students were more culturally oriented, with somewhat fewer practical motivations. Though students in Guntermann et al.'s study were, in general, interested in conversation, language-requirement students chose Spanish more often than French. Professional motivations were of interest to both French- and Spanish-language students.

In other studies, it has been reported that junior and community college students expressed a strong interest in acquiring speaking skills for the practical use of their chosen languages, as well as an understanding of foreign lands and cultures (Archer & O'Rourke, 1975). Other researchers have found that, although introductory and intermediate French students at a university were generally interested in current events, literature, and cultural information, the majority (80%) of intermediate-level students listed the language requirement as their reason for studying a foreign language (Pelc & Sauder, 1975, p. 196). When asked why they chose French, students' frequent response was "personal interest" (Pelc & Sauder, 1975, p. 198).

Other reports consider students' needs and interests as being communicative and functional in nature. Harlow et al. (1980) and Alalou and Chamberlain (1999) found that many students view travel as the most likely opportunity to practice language skills, which correlates with their need for acquiring both speaking and listening skills. Several other studies have shown that university and junior college students enrolled in language courses value speaking skills (Martin & Laurie, 1993; Harlow & Muyskens, 1994) and that they rated culture lower than all of the categories presented to them (Alalou & Chamberlain, 1999). Moreover, Rivers (1983b) reported that reading literature was a central interest to many university students, and Di Donato (1998) found that many students hoped to use language to advance their careers.

In addition, a "new generation" of "mature" students who are changing careers or upgrading their skills to meet new demands are entering classrooms (Lively, 1997). Given the variety of students' needs shown by these studies, universities should determine the extent to which their departmental missions and language program goals meet students' needs. The results from the studies reviewed above present an important challenge to the traditional role of the department in determining course content. As stated above, although students' perceptions of their learning goals are important and should be taken into account

in the development of language programs, they do not provide concrete curricular objectives.

## The Study

### *Research Questions*

This study aimed: (1) to investigate similarities and differences in language needs among students enrolled in Spanish, French, and German courses, and (2) to determine the extent to which students' perceived needs matched the missions the departments defined for their respective language programs. Student needs encompass a variety of aspects, including their motivations to study the language, their perceptions of language skills, and their anticipated uses for the language. The study also sought to learn to what extent student needs differed from or were similar to the needs of students reported in the studies reviewed above.

### *Participants*

The total number of subjects surveyed in the three language programs was 525: 77 students of Spanish, 363 students of French, and 85 students of German. A representative sample of students in both introductory and intermediate language courses was obtained for all three language groups.<sup>1</sup>

### *Data Collection*

With the help of language instructors in the three language departments, surveys were distributed to students in sections of introductory and intermediate language courses two weeks before the end of the fall semester in 1997. The survey, adapted from several sources (Brown, 1995; Guntermann, 1996; Richeterich, 1983), is comprised of 22 items (see Appendix). The survey, which has been piloted and has yielded interesting data, aims to gather information pertaining to demographics, students' motivations in studying the language, their perceptions of language skills, and their previous language experiences. Students were also asked where and how they anticipated using the language, whether or not they had visited countries where the languages are spoken, and whether or not they perceived the language they were studying to be easy to learn. In addition, structured interviews were conducted, using an adapted version of the interview guide from Lynch (1996), with the language program directors from the departments targeted for this study. The purpose of the interviews was to find out more about the goals of the programs, the means to reach the stated goals, the directors' opinions about language teaching, and the methods used in their programs.

### *Limitations*

This study should not be considered generalizable, because

there were many variables that were not controlled. However, its results may be applicable to similar settings, and it provides valuable data relevant to studies looking at students' language needs and motivations. Results of this study may assist other researchers in reevaluating the content of language courses and in devising teaching methodologies that take student needs into account.

## Findings

As shown in Table 1a, females outnumbered males in the three language programs. Such results were also reported by Guntermann et al. (1996). The majority of the students were 17 to 22 years of age. In both French and German, a significant percentage, 20%, were 23 or older, whereas in Spanish, the percentage was lower, with only 10% of students at least 23 years of age. In German and French, two major groups of students could be distinguished: An over-

whelming majority were undergraduates (85% of those studying French and 78% of those studying German), and an important group were graduate students (about 11% and 17% of students in the French and German programs, respectively). In Spanish, however, undergraduates accounted for 98% of the subjects surveyed. In addition, in Spanish, all of the surveyed students were undergraduates affiliated with the College of Arts and Sciences; students from other schools and programs were found in both the French and German programs.

Although many students had not yet declared their majors, a total of 11 different majors were found among students of Spanish, more than 20 were held by students of French, and 17 different majors were held by students of German (see Table 1b). The top three majors among Spanish students were Political Science (17%), Psychology (10%), and Art History (6%), whereas the three most com-

**Table 1a**

DEMOGRAPHICS						
	Spanish (n = 77)		French (n = 363)		German (n = 85)	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
<b>Language Experience</b>						
No experience	27	35	126	34	62	72
1–2 years in junior and high school	12	16	35	9	6	7
3–4 years in junior and high school	34	44	195	53	12	14
No answers	4	5	7	2	5	5
<b>Age</b>						
17–22 years old	68	88	281	77	67	79
23 and older	8	10	78	21	18	21
No answers	1	1	4	1.1	0	0
<b>Sex</b>						
Male	33	43	166	45	39	45
Female	43	56	197	54	46	54
No answers	1	1	0	0	0	0
<b>Status</b>						
Undergraduates	76	98.7	309	85.1	67	78.82
Graduates	0	0	42	11.5	15	17.65
Other	0	0	9	2.4	3	3.53
No answers	1	1.2	3	0.8	0	0
<b>Semesters at Another University</b>						
1 semester	2	3	8	2.2	3	3.53
2 semesters	7	9	13	3.5	2	2.35
3 semesters	4	5	6	1.6	2	2.35
4 semesters	3	4	15	4.1	6	4.7
5–9 semesters	3	4	46	12.6	15	17.67
No answer	5	8	22	6	11	12.94

mon majors in French were Economics (9%), English (7%), and History or Political Science (5%). In German, the three most important majors were Fine Arts (18%), History (10%), and English (10%). Language majors were limited in number. A total of eight students in the three programs chose to major in the language: four in French, two in German, and two in Spanish (see Table 7).

As for their foreign language backgrounds, many respondents indicated that they had studied Spanish for several years before enrolling in Spanish language courses at this university. As Table 1a shows, 17% had taken Spanish in high school for one to two years, 44% had studied Spanish for three to four years, and 35% said that they had not taken any Spanish courses in secondary school. In German, the majority, 72%, reported no prior study of German. Only 7% of the respondents reported having taken German for one to two years, and 14% had studied it for three to four years in high school. Nine percent of the students had taken French for one to two years, and 53%

had studied it for three to four years before enrolling in language courses. Thirty-four percent reported no study of French prior to college.

As to the question of whether or not they planned to study the language beyond the language requirement,<sup>2</sup> 51% of German respondents said that they would pursue the study of German compared with 41% in French and only 28% in Spanish (see Table 2). Based on the respondents' answers to the question of whether or not they would continue to take language courses, three groups were found in each program: those who would continue to study the language, those whose main objective was to fulfill the requirement, and an undecided group.

When asked to rank eight courses that they might be interested in taking, using the numbers 1, 2, and 3 (1 being the most valued course) only 37% percent in Spanish, 52% in French, and 37% in German ranked the courses. Many students were interested in conversation, literature, and advanced language courses, as Tables 3a, 3b, and 3c show.

**Table 1b**

	DEMOGRAPHICS					
	Spanish (n = 77)		French (n = 363)		German (n = 85)	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
<b>Majors</b>						
Undecided	21	27	94	25.9	12	14.1
History	2	3	21	5.7	9	10.5
English	3	4	27	7.4	9	10.5
Engineering	1	1	9	2.4	1	1.1
Economics	0	0	33	9	4	4.7
Political Science	13	17	19	5.2	4	4.7
Psychology	8	10	12	3.3	3	3.5
Art History	5	6	8	2.2	6	7.0
Computer Science	2	3	10	2.7	2	2.3
African American Studies	1	1	1	0.2	0	0
Philosophy	1	1	9	2.4	3	3.5
Physics	2	3	3	0.8	1	1.1
Math	0	0	7	1.9	3	3.5
Biology/Premed	0	0	20	5.5	2	2.3
Fine Arts	2	3	16	4.4	16	18.8
Spanish Language and Literature	0	0	1	0.2	1	1.1
French Language and Literature	0	0	0	0	1	1.1
German Language and Literature	0	0	1	0.2	2	2.3
Comparative Literature	0	0	4	1.1	3	3.5
Sociology	0	0	7	1.9	1	1.1
Anthropology	0	0	4	1.1	0	0
Creative Writing	0	0	4	1.1	0	0
Other	5	8	41	11.2	1	1.1
No answers	12	15	12	3.3	1	1.1

“Advanced language courses,” which generally focus on composition and stylistics or on literary analysis, are courses students can take beyond the introductory and intermediate required sequence. The majority of the respondents in the three language groups ranked conversation courses number 1, which correlates with the high percentages of students who valued speaking and listening skills.

Students were also asked to rate six language skills using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 being least important and 5 being most important).<sup>3</sup> The majority of students enrolled in both French and German ranked speaking the most important language skill to master, whereas the majority of Spanish students indicated that listening was the most valuable skill. One common result, though (see Tables 4, 5, and 6), was that students did not value cultural understanding as much as they valued the other skills among which they had to choose.

In addition, a question in the survey asked if respondents thought that the language that they were studying was “easy to learn” (see Table 7). A significant number of students surveyed in German (27%) felt — surprisingly — that German was easy, 21% in Spanish held the same opinion about Spanish, and only 11% of French students selected the “easy to learn” option for French. The results, shown in Table 7, suggest that Spanish is not perceived as easy and French is still seen as difficult by those who study it, a finding that could be attributed to the traditional focus on grammar noted by Siskin (1998). Language requirement appears to be less important for German students, whose top three reasons for studying German were personal interest (62%), liking the language (55%), and career plans (49%) (see Table 7). For those taking French, the top reasons were travel (69%), language requirement (66%), and liking the language (63%). Finally, the top reasons students gave for taking Spanish were language requirement (71%), liking the language (61%), and personal interest (56%). In addition, more than 40% of students in each program chose career plans as one of the reasons they were studying languages. Thirty-two percent of German students wanted to use the language as a tool for research, whereas only 11% of

those studying French and 8% of those studying Spanish gave research as a reason for enrolling in language courses.

In each group, many students appeared to relate emotionally to the language. In fact, when asked whether or not they used the language outside of the classroom, as shown in Tables 8, 9, and 10, a significant number of Spanish (56%), German (55%), and French (44%) students said yes. An important number of those who said that they practiced their language skills used the language with friends or family: Spanish, 42% with friends and 21% with family; French, 57% with friends and 11% with family; and German, 53% with friends and 21% with family. These results will be discussed later. Other sources of input mentioned by many French and German students included readings, native speakers, and films. Spanish students, interestingly, did not mention readings as a source of input.

## Discussion

In their mission statements, the language programs studied defined their goals as (1) to help students enrolled in basic courses gain proficiency in essential language skills and (2) to promote students’ understanding of the target cultures. In addition, the programs offered specialized and advanced courses in a variety of areas for majors and/or concentrators (Columbia College Bulletin, 1999-2000). Unlike the Spanish program, which appeared rather overwhelmed by its student population, the French and German programs wanted to increase their enrollments and attract more majors, double majors, and/or concentrators.

In the following sections, the results of this study will be discussed in light of both the missions of the language programs and the goals defined by the program directors. Several suggestions for meeting student needs will be made.

### *Student Population, Students’ Attitudes Toward Language Requirement, Communicative Skills, and Culture*

Results from the present study suggest that the respondents in the Spanish program were demographically differ-

**Table 2**

#### STUDYING THE LANGUAGE BEYOND REQUIREMENT

	Spanish (n = 77)		French (n = 363)		German (n = 85)	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Yes	22	28	172	47	44	52
No	41	53	118	33	15	18
Not applicable; don't know; not sure	14	18	73	20	26	31



ent from respondents in the French and German programs. Whereas Spanish respondents were exclusively

undergraduates, French and German students were a blend of undergraduates, graduates, and students from

**Table 3a**

RANKING OF SPANISH COURSES						
	Rank 1	%	Rank 2	%	Rank 3	%
1. Conversation courses	23	28	16	20	7	9
2. Literature courses	11	13	14	17	1	1
3. Civilization courses	2	2	7	9	8	10
4. Advanced language courses	3	4	9	11	7	9
5. Phonetics/ pronunciation	1	1	4	5	5	6
6. Advanced grammar course	0	0	3	4	3	4
7. Business Spanish course	1	1	5	6	4	5
8. Spanish for International Affairs	2	2	6	7	6	7

**Table 3b**

RANKING OF FRENCH COURSES						
	Rank 1	%	Rank 2	%	Rank 3	%
1. Conversation courses	132	35	80	21	41	11
2. Literature courses	44	12	65	17	41	11
3. Civilization courses	9	2	31	8	34	9
4. Advanced language courses	33	9	63	17	36	9
5. Phonetics /pronunciation	19	5	57	15	20	5
6. Advanced grammar course	9	2	23	6	14	4
7. Business French course	10	3	35	9	24	6
8. French for International Affairs	22	6	37	10	30	8

**Table 3c**

RANKING OF GERMAN COURSES						
	Rank 1	%	Rank 2	%	Rank 3	%
1. Conversation courses	27	31	15	17	10	11
2. Literature courses	24	27	15	17	6	7
3. Civilization courses	1	1	15	17	6	7
4. Advanced language courses	6	7	15	17	14	16
5. Phonetics /pronunciation	3	3	15	17	2	2
6. Advanced grammar course	0	0	15	17		0
7. Business German course	2	2	15	17	6	7
8. German for International Affairs	1	1	15	17	8	9

**Table 4**

## SPANISH STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE SKILLS

	1, 2		3		4, 5	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Reading	2	3	11	14	64	83
Writing	0	0	29	37	48	62
Listening	0	0	5	6	72	94
Understanding culture	16	21	33	42	28	36
Speaking	1	1	5	6	71	92
Grammar skills	5	6	22	29	50	65

Students rated each skill on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least important; 5 = most important)

**Table 5**

## FRENCH STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE SKILLS

	1, 2		3		4, 5	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Reading	11	3	59	16	293	80
Writing	30	8	96	26	237	65
Listening	2	0	37	10	324	89
Understanding culture	59	16	119	32	185	50
Speaking	5	1	22	6	336	92
Grammar skills	37	10	101	27	225	61

Students rated each skill on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least important; 5 = most important)

**Table 6**

## GERMAN STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE SKILLS

	1, 2		3		4, 5	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Reading	1	1	8	9	76	89
Writing	8	9	20	24	57	67
Listening	2	2	7	8	76	89
Understanding culture	23	27	25	29	37	44
Speaking	3	4	4	5	78	92
Grammar skills	7	8	16	19	62	73

Students rated each skill on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least important; 5 = most important)



other programs. Perhaps because their expected audience is potential undergraduate majors, the mission statements of both the German and French programs did not address the needs of graduate students and researchers whose goals for studying a language might be different from those of undergraduates.

The way students perceived the language requirement differed among the three departments. Since there is a language requirement, it seems reasonable to expect that the main goal of many students would be to fulfill the requirement and, in fact, that is what the study found. As other reports have shown (Guntermann et al. 1996), this study found that the majority of Spanish students perceived satisfying the language requirement as a major goal and that a significant number did not plan to pursue the study of Spanish. Unlike Spanish students, many students in both French and German did not restrict their interest in language study to satisfying the requirement, and many students, particularly in German, planned to pursue the study of language.

Like many college and university students elsewhere (Archer & O'Rourke, 1975; Lively, 1997; Harlow & Muyskens, 1994; Alalou & Chamberlain, 1999), students' common goal in the three language programs was acquiring listening and speaking skills, and some valued the study of literature. The directors of the language programs studied recognize the teaching of communicative skills as their overall goal, and the departments advocate the use of the target language in the classroom and the integration of

new technologies into the curriculum as ways to reach the stated communicative goals. Results from this study suggest that the goals of the language programs are congruent with the students' communicative needs, as reflected by students' rating of speaking, listening, and reading skills (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

In addition, results from German respondents (see Table 3c) support the findings of other studies, which indicate that university students value the reading of literature (Rivers, 1983a). In fact, many students rated literature courses number 1 after conversation (see Tables 3a, 3b, and 3c). But unlike students in Pelc and Sauder's (1975) study, for example, respondents in this study did not value "cultural understanding" as highly (see Tables 4, 5, and 6). Although in this study, "culture" is understood in its broad sense, referring to both high and popular culture as generally presented in foreign language manuals, we know very little about students' definition of "culture," because students in this study were not asked to provide a specific definition of the term.

The results of this study regarding students' attitude toward cultural understanding coincide with those of Guntermann et al. (1996), Harlow and Muyskens (1994), and Alalou and Chamberlain (1999). In these studies, students saw very little relationship between language skills and cultural knowledge. In this study, students' interest in language and to some extent in literature (particularly in German) contradicts their attitude toward culture. It is possible that either learners perceive the mere mastery of

Table 7

## REASONS FOR STUDYING SPANISH, FRENCH, AND GERMAN

	Spanish (n = 77)		French (n = 363)		German (n = 85)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Personal interest	43	56	186	51	53	62
Liking the language	47	61	232	63	47	55
Language requirement	55	71	241	66	32	37
Majoring in the language	2	3	4	1	2	2
Double majoring in the Language	1	1	5	1	0	0
Career plans	33	43	148	40	42	49
Using the language for research	6	8	42	11	28	32
Easy to learn	16	21	41	11	23	27
Travel	43	56	254	69	42	49
No answers	0	0	0	0	0	0

Because of multiple answers, percentages do not add up to 100.

linguistic forms as equal to cultural understanding or that they separate culture from language skills. Students' focus on language alone without links to culture (Guntermann et al., 1996) might have affected their views of language learning.

Although one of the goals of the language programs is to promote students' understanding of the target cultures by integrating cultural elements into the curriculum, the results suggest that there is a need for more courses that draw attention to the importance of culture in communi-

**Table 8**

USE OF SPANISH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM			
	Where and with whom Spanish is used	<i>F</i>	%
No answers		1	1
No		33	43
Yes		43	56
		<i>F</i> of "yes"	% of "yes"
	Neighborhood	17	40
	With friends	18	42
	At home/with family	9	21
	With native speakers	3	7
	Television	2	5
	At work	3	7
	Restaurants	1	2

**Table 9**

USE OF FRENCH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM			
	Where and with whom French is used	<i>F</i>	%
No answers		2	.5
No		201	55.3
Yes		160	44
		<i>F</i> of "yes"	% of "yes"
	Neighborhood	6	3.7
	With friends	92	57.5
	At home/with family	19	11.8
	With native speakers	17	10.6
	Television	4	2.5
	At work	5	3.1
	Restaurants	0	0
	Film	12	7.5
	Reading	7	4.3

education. Greater emphasis on cultural content may lead students to appreciate the role of culture in communication (Siskin, 1998); however, some widely practiced approaches to teaching culture have been criticized because they appear to perpetuate cultural stereotypes. Imparting real cultural understanding requires that teachers be aware of their own cultural biases (Omaggio Hadley, 2000, p. 354) and acknowledge the intricate relationships between language and cultural practices. These relationships are related to the speakers' behavior in society, their way of conceptualizing the world around them, and how they establish the complex network of linguistic forms and communicative functions (Galloway, 1992, pp. 89–91).

To help students develop cultural understanding through reading, Galloway (1992) favors an approach that parallels schemata theory. Her approach consists of four steps: (1) *thinking*, to orient students to the cultural material; (2) *looking*, to help them form predictions and expectations; (3) *learning*, to allow them to test predictions and learn about the subtleties of the text; and (4) *integrating*, to give them the opportunity to reflect on the content of the text (pp. 106–113). This model could help students in these programs appreciate culture through reading, a skill they have rated highly (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

Guntermann et al. (1996) reported that French students were more culturally oriented, but less practically oriented, than their Spanish counterparts. Although results of the present study differ from these researchers' findings, they support Compagnon's (1997) observation about French, which seems to have lost some of its historical prestige. Despite the proven importance of cultural

awareness and the emphasis put on culture at the college level, students in this study did not link culture to language competence, nor did they value civilization courses. The three departments need to address this issue, given the mission they have defined for themselves within the institution as environments of culture and civilization. Poorly attended cultural events noted in some of these departments seem to indicate students' lack of interest in non-classroom work. Also, the limited number of students who plan to major in the three languages (see Table 7) could mean that either students need to be informed of the goals of the advanced courses or that students' needs are not being met beyond the language requirement. In addition, beginning-level language students may think it is not possible for them to obtain the skill level necessary for a foreign language major.

### Conversation Courses

The fact that students are interested in conversation courses and that they express the need for basic communicative skills is encouraging. With a well-conceived language program in place, students who have a strong desire to obtain communicative skills should be able to attain an appreciable level of competency. This pool of students may then become potential majors, double majors, or concentrators, thus fulfilling one of the goals of the language programs, which is to increase the number of majors.

In the three language programs targeted for this study, conversation courses are two-point, noncore classes that run parallel to either introductory or intermediate language courses. Although conversation courses are relative-

**Table 10**

#### USE OF GERMAN OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

	Where and with whom French is used	F	%
No answers		0	0
No		38	44.7
Yes		47	55.2
		<b>F of "yes"</b>	<b>% of "yes"</b>
	Neighborhood	2	4.2
	With friends	25	53
	At home/with family	10	21.2
	With native speakers	7	14.8
	Television	0	0
	At work	1	2
	Reading	4	8.5
	Singing	1	2

ly popular at the advanced levels, beginning French and German conversation courses were eliminated because of low enrollments. In a typical conversation course, as one language program director put it, "the materials change with each instructor in order to reflect students' interests." Conversation topics include cultural events and films from the evening cinema series organized by the departments. Relying on these eclectic approaches, conversation courses contrast sharply with the highly structured and clearly defined syllabi of introductory and intermediate courses. To integrate conversation courses into the language programs, the departments must rethink course content and methodology to ensure consistency and continuity in the curriculum and to avoid teaching materials that have been covered in previous levels.

Reviewing the courses in light of these results is the first step in helping students enjoy what they like most in the languages. For instance, to respond to the students' needs for conversational skills, the curriculum should include literary as well as journalistic texts (e.g., with themes such as "immigration in French and francophone literature" or "differences and similarities among speakers of French"). To expand students' vocabulary, conversation courses should include authentic materials like short novels, films, and magazine and newspaper articles on topics covered in previous levels and with which students have some degree of familiarity. To help students engage in reading and listening comprehension activities, the assignments should include reports, group discussions, and research projects. Etienne and Vanbaelen (1999) provide a model for integrating literature into an enriched conversation.

### *Language and Careers*

The results of the present study suggest that students' interests often translate into practical goals, such as using the language to advance their careers, as shown by the number of students who indicated that they were studying languages for career purposes. In each program, over 40% of students, with nearly 50% in the German program, said that they studied languages for career goals (see Table 7). These findings support other reports, which found that German students planned to use their language skills in nontraditional jobs (Brosh, 1996; Siskin, 1996). However, the results presented here do not reflect the perceived usefulness of Spanish reported by other researchers (e.g., Guntermann, 1996). Even though these Spanish students may not study language as a career goal, however, many chose "career" when asked to specify where they thought they would use their Spanish skills. Unlike Spanish students, who expected to use their language skills in the workplace in the United States, students of German and French would be expected to choose careers in international affairs or politics. Although the French and German programs offer courses

such as "French for Diplomats," "German for International Affairs," and "Business German," it is hard to know how students will use the skills they learn in these courses.

### *Use of Language Skills Outside of the Classroom*

Many students reported that they practiced their language skills outside of the classroom (see Tables 8, 9, and 10), again confirming students' interest in using the languages for communication. One of the surprising findings is the high percentage of students in both the French (10%) and German (14%) programs who reported using the language to communicate with native speakers, contradicting the assumption that only Spanish students use the language for communication. Apparently the location of the institution in an urban area in which Spanish is widely spoken did not favor the use of Spanish with native speakers. Though some Spanish students reported using the language in the neighborhood and with their friends, the limited number who use the language with native speakers could be attributed to the nature of the academic environment and to sociological factors, which limit the opportunities students have to interact with native speakers.

One of the surprising findings is that, unlike Spanish students, an important number of French students reported that members of their families speak French. Although finding these students in first- and second-year language courses is somewhat puzzling, they could constitute an important resource for the language program because of their practiced language skills in social settings. They could, for instance, motivate those learners whose practice of the language is limited to the classroom, discuss the strategies that have worked for them, and assist other learners in gaining more self-confidence and overcoming the anxiety and fear of using a foreign language. The language programs studied have not yet explored the possibility of developing outreach programs that link the language programs to the community.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to find similarities and differences in needs among students enrolled in three languages. The results of the study suggest that there are indeed similarities across languages in (1) students' emotional ties to the languages; (2) their interest in acquiring communicative skills; and (3) their future plans to use the languages for career purposes. Students, however, differ across languages in (1) their language backgrounds; and (2) their perceptions of the language requirement. As reported in other studies, for most students, language study involves personal interest and career preparation, a finding that program directors in these three departments can use in reevaluating their programs.

In terms of differences, the study found that although

many French and Spanish respondents have had exposure to these languages before college, a very high percentage of students in German have not studied German before. As other authors have found, a higher percentage of students in Spanish than in the other languages cite the requirement as the primary motivation to study the language. Also, students differ in the ways in which they use languages outside of the classroom. Students use French and German more often with native speakers than Spanish students do, an interesting finding that seems counterintuitive. For French and German language program directors, this finding can form a basis for developing outreach programs. The Spanish language program director may wish to seek out further opportunities for students to participate in cultural exchange within the local community.

As for the congruence of the missions of the language programs with students' needs, the fact that the majority of these students did not perceive cultural understanding as an important aspect in language study is at odds with the stated mission of all three language programs. Although some of the goals of the programs appear to match students' expectations, other goals, such as helping students develop cultural understanding, appear to be less important to students. Moreover, as other studies have reported, students' interest in using the language for career purposes is an aspect that language directors could integrate into the missions of the language programs. The results from this study also suggest that a review of conversation courses in both content and methodology may help strengthen the departments' missions.

The variety of needs expressed by the students, the heterogeneous student population, the overwhelming demand for communicative skills, and the rather limited number of majors all serve to demonstrate the tension inherent within the missions of the language programs in these departments. Studies such as this one, which look closely at students' needs, can provide a partial blueprint for language program directors. This blueprint will enable them to optimize curricular offerings to match students' needs and expectations, and to think about ways to educate students about the importance of parts of the educational mission, such as cultural understanding, for which they may not a priori perceive a need.

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## Notes

1. Some students who were allowed to take the questionnaires home did not return the questionnaires.

2. In this institution, fulfilling the language requirement is defined as having successfully completed the two sequences of introductory and the two sequences of intermediate language courses.

3. In Tables 4, 5 and 6, the ratings 1 through 5 refer to the Likert scale:

1 = not important at all; 2 = not important, 3 = may or may not be important, 4 = important, 5 = very important. The collapsed 1 and 2 refer to low rating of the language skills, and the collapsed 4 and 5 refer to high rating of the language skills. The number 3 is understood as neutral.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this effort to help us better address students' concerns and preferences regarding the Spanish, French, and German language programs. In order to improve the teaching of these languages, the three departments are conducting a survey in several courses.

**This questionnaire is anonymous.**

Please take few minutes to answer the following:

1. Your native language(s) (language or languages spoken with parents at home): \_\_\_\_\_
2. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Sex:    Male \_\_\_\_\_    Female \_\_\_\_\_
4. Semesters at this university: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Semesters at another university: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Academic major: \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Status:**                          Main College: \_\_\_\_\_                          Another College: \_\_\_\_\_                          General Studies: \_\_\_\_\_  
    Graduate: \_\_\_\_\_                          Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
8. Your current Spanish/French/German course: \_\_\_\_\_  
Your first Spanish/French/German course at this university: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Please check the reason(s) you are taking Spanish/French/German courses:  
\_\_\_\_ I am personally interested in Spanish/French/German (family, friends speak the language etc.)  
\_\_\_\_ I like Spanish/French/German.  
\_\_\_\_ I plan on majoring in Spanish/French/German.  
\_\_\_\_ I want to fulfill the language requirement.  
\_\_\_\_ I plan on double majoring in Spanish/French/German and \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_ I would like to use Spanish/French/German in my career (business, international relations, etc.)  
\_\_\_\_ I want to use Spanish/French/German for research purposes.  
\_\_\_\_ I want to use Spanish/French/German when I travel.  
\_\_\_\_ I think Spanish/French/German is easy to learn.  
\_\_\_\_ Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_.
10. Have you spent any time in a Spanish/French/German speaking country?  
\_\_\_\_ **Yes**                          Where? \_\_\_\_\_ How long? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ **No**
11. Years of Spanish/French/German in Junior High School: \_\_\_\_\_  
in High School: \_\_\_\_\_
12. Years of Spanish/French/German at another institution before coming to this university (if it applies): \_\_\_\_  
NA (Not Applicable): \_\_\_\_
13. Do you have a relative who speaks Spanish/French/German?  
\_\_\_\_ **Yes**                          Who? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ **No**
14. Where and when do you think you will use Spanish/French/German? \_\_\_\_\_



15. Do you have friends who are taking Spanish/French/German this semester?

Yes How many? \_\_\_\_

No

If yes, do you discuss what you learn in the Spanish/ French/ German course?

Yes

No

16. Do you get to use your Spanish/French/German outside of the classroom?

Yes Where? \_\_\_\_\_

No

17. Are you planning on continuing to study Spanish/French/German beyond the language requirement?

Yes

No

Not Applicable because (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

If you continue to study Spanish/French/German beyond the language requirement, which courses would you likely be interested in? Rank the top 3 choices (1 = most important; 3 = least important)

conversation courses

literature courses

civilization courses

advanced language courses (grammar, readings, and composition)

phonetics/pronunciation courses

advanced grammar courses (grammar only with exercises)

business Spanish/French/German courses

Spanish/French/German for International Affairs

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

18. Please rate the subskills of the item below using 1 to 5

(1 being the least important, and 5 being the most important)

**Writing**

least important

most important

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| • using correct grammar and vocabulary  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • writing formal and informal styles    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • writing genres (letters, essays etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • developing academic writing skills    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

19. Please rate the item below using 1 to 5 (1 being the least important, and 5 being the most important)

**Reading**

least important

most important

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| • reading literature                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • reading newspapers and magazines         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • reading primary sources in the languages | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • reading instructional materials          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

20. Please rate the item below using 1 to 5 (1 being the least important, and 5 being the most important)

**Listening**

least important

most important

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| • understanding lectures in French                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • understanding media (Film, TV, Radio)               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • understanding colloquial sayings and idioms         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • recognizing cultural references to understand words | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • understanding non-verbal communication devices      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| • understanding real conversations in the language    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

21. What are the most important skills in a study of language in your opinion? Please rate these items from 1 to 5 (1 being the least important, and 5 being the most important)

	least important			most important	
• Reading	1	2	3	4	5
• Writing	1	2	3	4	5
• Listening	1	2	3	4	5
• Understanding the culture of speakers of the languages	1	2	3	4	5
• Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
• Grammar skills	1	2	3	4	5

22. If you had the opportunity, which of the following would you like to participate in outside of class? Please check any that apply.

- Spanish/French/German club
- Spanish/French/German House group
- E-mail with Spanish/French/German speakers in other countries
- E-mail with Spanish/French/German students at this university
- Spanish/French/German television programs
- Reading literature in Spanish/French/German
- Conversation with native speakers of Spanish/French/German
- Surfing the Internet for Spanish/French/German Web sites.
- Spanish/French/German movies
- Reading magazines and/or newspapers in Spanish/French/German
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_