

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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