

Who is Taking French and Why?

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Abstract: *In the Spring 1996 semester, first- and fourth-semester students at Arizona State University were surveyed to find out why they had chosen to study French, whether they planned to continue studying French, and what courses they would like to see offered. The responses to this survey indicated that our students plan to visit France or a French-speaking area, that they are most interested in gaining fluency in French, and that they would like to see a variety of classes offered. Although literature classes were a popular option for many students, a considerable number indicated interest in classes in French for special purposes, language classes, and culture classes. These responses tell us that offering a range of diverse classes can attract and retain students in French programs.*

Overview

It is well known and well documented that enrollments in French have suffered a catastrophic drop in recent years, with a decline of almost 25% between 1990 and 1995 (Pertman 1998). Many articles and conference sessions have lamented this decline and discussed the causes and possible remedies (Jedan 1998; Siskin 1998; Valdman 1995, 1996, 1997, among others). It is not the purpose of this paper to review these articles; the problem is well known to all of us who teach and who see our class sizes dropping and number of sections falling. Part of the decline is attributed to the popularity of Spanish as a choice for a foreign language.

At Arizona State University, we have not seen the catastrophic drop in enrollments experienced by many other colleges. In Spring 1996, there were 576 students enrolled in our regular lower-division French classes; in Spring 1998 that number rose to 584. Because we are in a traditionally Hispanic area, Spanish has always been the first choice of students. Yet French is the second largest language offering at the University. It would be interesting and revealing to see why students choose to take French, given the relative popularity of Spanish and the fact that we are geographically distant from any large francophone area.

Description of Survey

Students Surveyed

A total of 279 students were surveyed in the Spring of 1996: 103 in the first semester (FRE 101), 66 in our course for *faux débutants* (FRE 111, which condenses the first-year material into one semester and is intended for those students who have already studied French), and 110 in the fourth semester (FRE 202). The college of Liberal Arts and Sciences has a two-year language requirement; thus, students were surveyed in the first and last semesters of required language study: the first-semester classes (101 and 111) in order to find out why students decided to begin the study of French, and the last semester (202) to see what would encourage students to continue French once the language requirement was satisfied. Students have ample choices for their foreign language because the Department of Languages and Literatures offers a broad range of

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