

## French for Professional Purposes in US Undergraduate Education: An Analysis of Course Offerings and Student Demand

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### Recommended Citation

Bouche, H. & Reisinger, D.S. (2021). French for Professional Purposes in US Undergraduate Education: An Analysis of Course Offerings and Student Demand. *Global Business Languages*, 21, 54-70.  
Available at (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.4079/gbl.v21.4>

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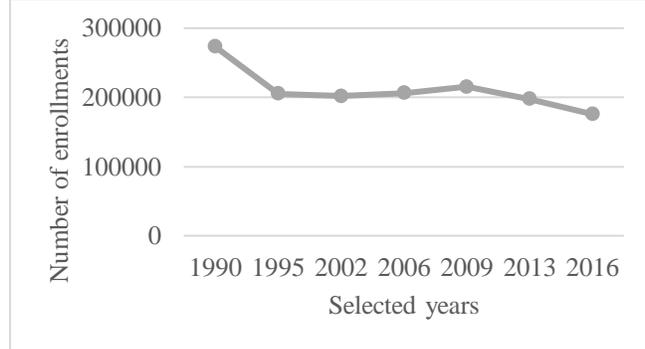
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### **French for Professional Purposes in US Undergraduate Education: An Analysis of Course Offerings and Student Demand**

**Abstract:** In the past decade, there has been a significant decline in French language enrollments in US higher education institutions, despite a growing demand for French proficiency in the US job market. These trends illustrate the need to offer French for Professional Purposes (FPP) courses, which allow students to develop language skills adapted to the professional environment. Our research aims to analyze the supply and demand for FPP courses. In this current study, we assessed the proportion of four-year colleges and universities that offer FPP courses, and we compiled the variety of their course offerings. We then conducted a survey of students enrolled in the FPP courses. Among the 545 institutions reviewed, a majority offered at least one FPP course, usually Business French. Institutions offering more than one course and a wider diversity of course topics were less common. Based on questionnaire responses, we found a significant mismatch between the supply of courses and students' demand for FPP course offerings. We also found that, if given the possibility, most undergraduate students in the first through third years would like to enroll in another FPP course in the following academic year. These results call for further developments of FPP courses nationwide and greater diversification of course offerings.

*Keywords:* business, employability, French for Professional Purposes (FPP), student demand, undergraduate French courses

Over the past decade, there has been a significant decline in world language enrollments at US institutions of higher education. A census published by the Modern Language Association (MLA) showed that student enrollment at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in all language courses other than English dropped by 9.2 % between fall 2013 and fall 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2019). In French, there was an even greater loss of enrollments (11.1%) during the same time period. This drop is even more striking over the last three decades. From 1990–2016, there was an overall decrease in French enrollments of 35.7%. After a brief rise between 2006 and 2009, enrollment again plummeted, with a loss of 18.9% between 2009 and 2016 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1***Fall Enrollments in French in Selected Years*

*Note.* Adapted from Looney & Lusin, 2019.

Between 2013 and 2016, 58.5% of French programs reported decreasing student enrollments. This drop mostly affected undergraduate programs, especially introductory undergraduate programs (the first through the fourth semesters), since, taken separately, only 44.8% of graduate programs reported decreasing student enrollments. For the same three-year period, there was a net loss of 129 French programs in the United States, which Looney called “a stunning statistic” (cited in Johnson, 2019). A varied set of factors may explain this decline in programs, such as the impact of the 2008 recession, higher education institutions’ prioritization of STEM programs, and the long-term effect of the removal of the language requirements at colleges and universities (Johnson, 2019). The health and economic crisis that emerged in 2020 may also significantly affect programs and enrollments. Results of the next MLA survey, to be conducted in 2020 and released in 2021, will be important for confirming or reversing these downward trends.

Despite this decreasing enrollment in French in higher education institutions, there remains a growing demand for language skills in the US job market. A study published in 2017 showed that the number of online job advertisements targeting bilingual workers had more than doubled between 2010 and 2015 (New American Economy, 2017). Indeed, the number of online job advertisements that required French proficiency increased from 9,509 to 22,296 postings, an increase of almost 135% over five years (New American Economy, 2017). The analysis of these job advertisements showed that French is especially in-demand in sectors like humanitarian aid, insurance, and health care, with hundreds of jobs for French speakers offered in 2015. In addition, a survey of employers conducted in 2018 highlighted that nine out of ten employers in the United States reported a reliance on US-based employees with language skills other than English; 56% of these employers indicated that their foreign language demand will increase in the next five years (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 2019). This survey also revealed that French is the third most in-demand language reported by employers (22%), after Spanish (85%) and Chinese (34%), both for those with domestic and international language needs. 17% of respondents noted that French was in short supply. Additionally, we know that proficiency in a second language can lead to higher salary. A study showed that the earnings of college graduates who speak a second language are higher than the earnings of those who do not (Saiz & Zoido, 2005). While these only amount to a two- to three-percent gain, when taken over the career of an individual, these gains can be significant. Taken together, these data illustrate the importance of FPP: to develop language skills oriented towards the job market.

French for Professional Purposes strengthens the path between French programs and career, thereby aligning with the MLA (2007) call for higher education to be more responsive to the needs of students seeking jobs in a new global society. French for Professional Purposes falls under the disciplinary umbrella of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), a field that emerged in the mid-1970s in the United States and that was implemented at a majority of US colleges and universities a decade later (Grosse & Voght, 1991). The University of Hawaii, for instance, developed Business French and French for Travel Industry Management majors in the 1980s (Bénouis, 1986). According to Grosse and Voght (1991), LSP courses provide “an alternative to traditional language course at first- and second-year level and an option other than literature, civilization, and linguistics for advanced undergraduate and graduate students” (p. 181). In the context of French language learning, the goal of these courses is to prepare students whose native language is not French to complete French language course work in specific subject areas, or perform professional duties using the French language (Martin, 2010). The term “French for Professional Purposes” is focused on language skills that are oriented towards the professional environment and aligns with a broader definition of business (Gonglewski & Esseesy, 2020). It reflects the developments of numerous LSP programs that were extended beyond business to include language for various professions (Fryer, 2012). In this current study, FPP refers to a wide range of professional sectors like business, international relations, tourism, health, or science and engineering, but excludes professions for which French proficiency is the core business, such as French language teaching, or translation and interpretation.

This article builds upon previous works investigating LSP offerings in US higher education (Fryer, 2012; Grosse & Voght, 1990; Long & Uscinski, 2012; Sánchez-López et al., 2017) and answers the calls from Martin (2010) to examine existing French LSP programs across the country, to investigate the variety of course offerings, and to identify the types of students enrolled. The overarching goal of this current study is to provide a better understanding of the present environment for FPP courses at US colleges and universities by analyzing the supply and demand for these courses. The two main research objectives of our study are: 1) to assess the proportion of higher education institutions offering FPP courses among four-year colleges and universities with French programs, as well as the variety of these offerings; and 2) to better identify the profiles and interests of students enrolled in these courses.

## **Methodology**

Our research is based on a quantitative study of FPP courses offered at US four-year colleges and universities, as well as an online questionnaire targeting students enrolled in these courses.

### **Analysis of Course Offerings**

Our study reviewed the 552 US higher education institutions that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) listed as conferring Bachelor’s degrees and as offering a program or major in French Language and Literature<sup>1</sup> as of April 16, 2020 (NCES, n.d.). The database did not allow us to uncover institutions offering French courses that do not offer a program or major in French. The sample included colleges and universities in every US state (as well as the District

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<sup>1</sup> The database, which is searchable by “programs/majors,” allows one to select “French Language and Literature” from the category of “Romance Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics.”

of Columbia) except Alaska. We excluded seven institutions not pertinent to the study (institutions no longer offering French courses, institutions that had merged, or graduate schools), bringing the sample down to 545 higher education institutions.<sup>2</sup> For universities with several campuses that offer a program in French, the database considered each campus as a distinct entity. Among those 545 institutions, some of them were found to offer a minor rather than a major in French (despite being listed as offering a program/major in the French language and literature category in the NCES database), but they were kept in the sample to maximize our potential to detect departments offering French courses.

For each institution, we listed all FPP courses offered at the undergraduate level, based on an online search of a respective institution's website; sources included the French or language department's webpage and/or the institution's 2019–2020 course catalog. Only courses offered by US institutions were taken into account, thereby excluding courses taken as part of a university-sponsored global education program abroad. French for Professional Purposes courses were identified using course names and descriptions, and then classified under one of the following categories: general (all courses with undefined professional area, such as French for the Professions, French for Professional Communication, and French for Careers), business, international affairs, health, tourism, science/engineering, journalism/communication, or law/justice. All other FPP courses targeting a defined professional area not falling under the previous categories were classified under an "other" category (e.g., French for Film and TV Professionals, Culinary French, and French for Advertising).

We used course descriptions to distinguish FPP courses from courses on culture and civilization. For example, we identified a significant number of courses related to French media, yet most of them explored French-speaking cultures through the media and thus were not included in the analysis. However, we did select courses for students who were interested in working with the news media, including writing newspaper articles and preparing sketches for broadcasting programs. Similarly, all courses related to the tourism industry were included. However, excluded were all courses aimed to prepare students to travel to France for leisure or a study abroad experience (e.g., French for Travelers). In the few cases in which courses featured two disciplines, we categorized them with the first category labelled in the course title. For example, French for Medical and Legal Professions fell under the category of health. We excluded courses for which French was not an added value, but rather the central theme, such as French language teaching or translation. However, we included all translation courses applied to a specific professional sector, considering that the translation could be used in those cases as a pedagogical method to explore a professional environment (e.g., Commercial French Translation). Lastly, we used course numbers to estimate the level of the courses and determine whether these were lower-division courses (generally 100 or 1000, and 200 or 2000 levels) or upper-division courses (generally 300 or 3000, and 400 or 4000 levels).

## **Student Questionnaire**

To better understand the profile of students enrolled in FPP courses, we implemented an online survey targeting students enrolled in one of the courses identified in our analysis during the 2019–2020 academic year. Designed using Survey Monkey, a web-based survey service provider, the questionnaire was anonymous, completed on a voluntary basis, and required less than ten minutes to complete. The introductory statement of the questionnaire explained the

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<sup>2</sup> Some relevant institutions may have been missed if not indexed properly in the database.

objective of the survey and described the target sample of students enrolled in a FPP course in 2019–2020. The questionnaire contained 14 questions (see Appendix A). No personal data were collected. For each course identified (446 courses in total), we contacted the relevant instructors via e-mail and asked them to distribute the online questionnaire to their students. When we could not identify an instructor, we asked a language program director or department administrator to share the survey. Course catalogs did not always reflect the actual course offering; we were informed by e-mail that some courses were not offered during that academic year, and sometimes had not been offered for several years (e.g., due to an irregular offering, budgetary constraints, low enrollments, etc.). If courses were not offered in 2019–2020, we accepted surveys filled by students enrolled in 2018–2019 only (which represented 2% of respondents).

We received 177 completed questionnaires from students between April 28 and June 5, 2020. We excluded incomplete questionnaires and questionnaires with irrelevant answers (e.g., questionnaires from students not enrolled in a FPP course and questionnaires with inconsistencies in responses), which resulted in a total of 143 complete responses from 28 universities located in 22 US states and representing 33 courses overall. Based on instructors' feedback and completed questionnaires, we had confirmation that students of at least 47 courses were reached by the survey. Considering that each course hosted an average of 15 students (also based on instructors' feedback), the target population of this survey summed up to 705 students. Our response rate is based on this target population, and thus amounts to 20%.

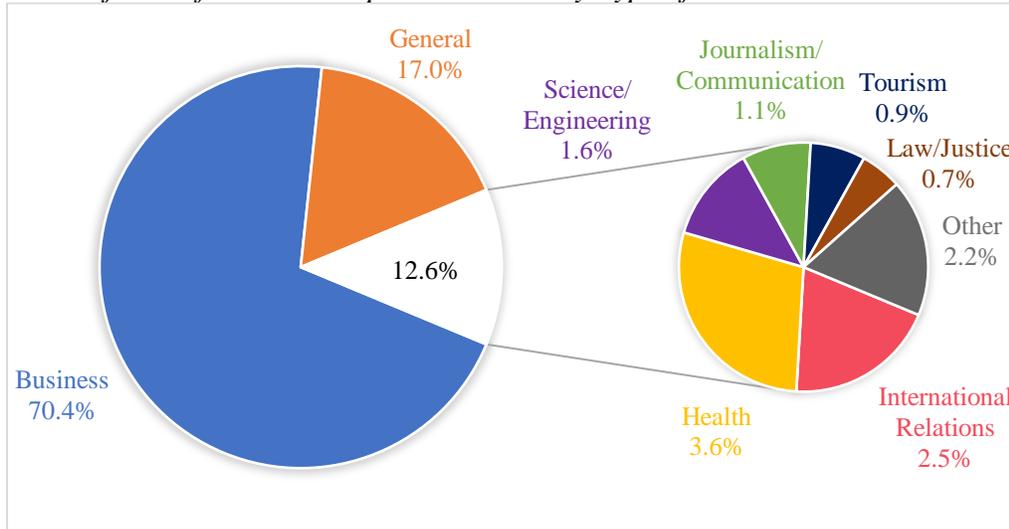
## **Findings**

### **Course Offering Analysis**

We conducted a course offering analysis in order to identify higher education institutions offering FPP courses. Our study found that 58.7% of US colleges and universities with French undergraduate programs offered at least one FPP course (see Appendix B for results per state). Among the 446 courses offered at 320 institutions, the vast majority fell under the topic of business (70.4%), followed by general FPP courses (17%): these two topics alone thus constituted nearly 88% of the supply of FPP courses. The other courses identified were related to health (3.6%), international relations (2.5%), science and engineering (1.6%), journalism/communication (1.1%), tourism (0.9%), and law/justice (0.7%). All other disciplines counted for less than 0.5% each; taken together, they represented just 2.2% of the ensemble of course offerings (see Figure 2). Among the courses for which course numbering allowed us to evaluate a level ( $n = 441$ ), we identified a large proportion of upper-division courses (79%) compared to lower-division courses (21%). As for the distribution of FPP courses among colleges and universities, 73.4% offered only one course, 19.1% offered two courses, and only 7.5% offered three or more courses.

**Figure 2**

*French for Professional Purposes Courses by Type of Courses*



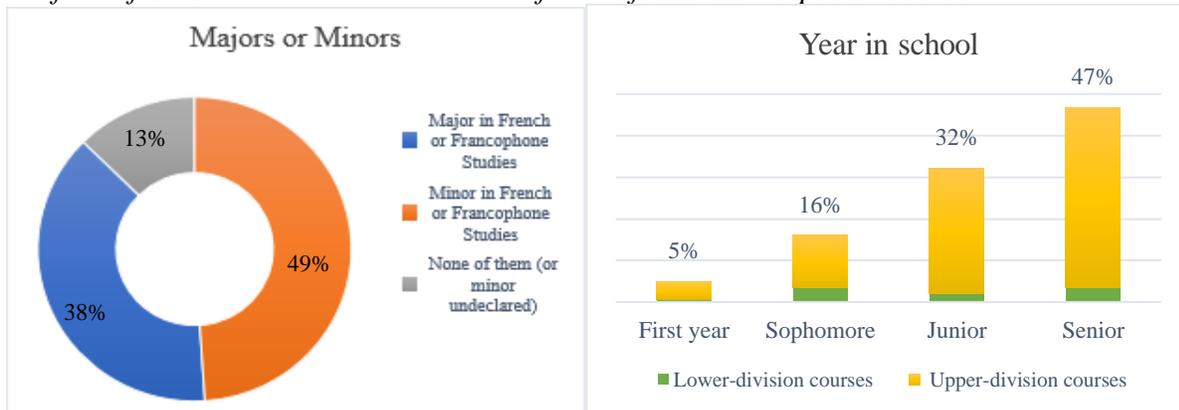
Note. n = 446 courses analyzed at 320 higher education institutions.

**Questionnaire Results**

Results from the online questionnaire indicated that among students enrolled in a FPP course, there were more students pursuing the minor (49%) than those pursuing the major (38%) in French or Francophone Studies (see Figure 3). There was a non-negligible number of students (13%) who were neither majoring nor minoring in French (or who were still undeclared at the time of the survey). In total, for 84% of students, the FPP course was an elective course; that is to say, a FPP course was chosen among a variety of offerings, compared to 16% of students for whom it was a degree requirement. Regarding the student’s year in college or university, the majority of students were seniors (47%), followed by juniors (32%), sophomores (16%), and first-year students (5%). Figure 3 shows that the majority of students, no matter their year in school, were enrolled in upper-division courses, which reflects the large majority of upper-division courses identified in our analysis of course offerings.

**Figure 3**

*Profiles of Students Enrolled in a French for Professional Purposes Course*

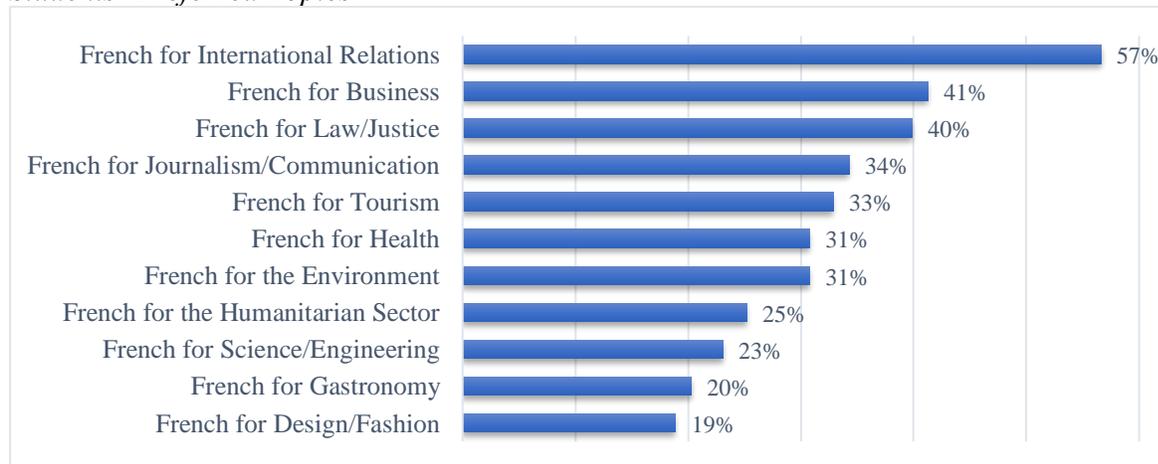


Note. n = 143 respondents from 28 higher education institutions.

We asked students to identify their primary motivation for enrolling in their FPP course by selecting one answer among a list of four (see question 10 in Appendix A). For a majority of students (68%), their primary motivation was related to professional development: 58% indicated that attending the course in question would help improve their ability to communicate in French in a professional environment, and 10% stated that it was a means to learn vocabulary used in specific professional sectors. For 30% of students, the primary motivation was to expand and diversify their knowledge of French, which suggests their motivation was not necessarily linked to developing skills that they could use in a professional context. Importantly, 88% of first-, second-, and third-year students indicated that if given the possibility, they would like to enroll in another FPP course in the following academic year.

Students were then asked to imagine that they had the opportunity to enroll in a wide variety of FPP courses, and to then select a maximum of four preferred topics (see question 12 in Appendix A). We specifically mentioned to select only courses in which they would actually enroll to have a better idea of the demand for such courses. Results, listed in full in Figure 4, show that the first preferred course topic was French for International Relations, chosen by more than half of the respondents (57%), followed by French for Business (41%) and French for Law and Justice (40%).

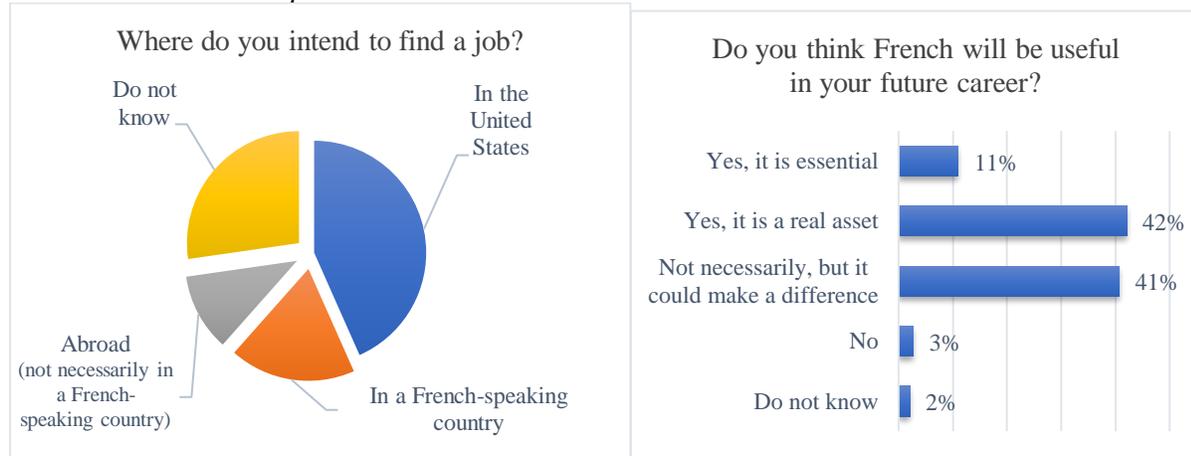
**Figure 4**  
*Students' Preferred Topics*



*Note.* Included in this survey question are n = 143 respondents from 28 higher education institutions. The percentage corresponds to the number of students who selected a course topic among their preferred ones (up to four choices). No ranking of the choices was requested.

Lastly, we examined students' career perspectives in terms of their desired location for their intended future job. 43% declared their intent to find a job in the United States, 18% in a French-speaking country, and 11% abroad, not necessarily in a French-speaking country (see Figure 5). The remainder, representing more than a quarter of our sample, was indecisive. The questionnaire also revealed that while 41% of students surveyed were not sure whether French would be useful in their career, most students (53%) believed it would be (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**  
*Students' Career Perspectives*



Note. n = 143 respondents from 28 higher education institutions.

### Discussion

Our study found that a slight majority of four-year US colleges and universities with French programs offered FPP courses. Almost 74% of them offered only one FPP course, thereby reflecting the larger trend identified in a previous study that the majority of departments offer only one LSP course of a specific language per year (Long & Uscinski, 2012). Among the institutions offering several courses, we identified different structures that support the development of FPP offerings. Some institutions offer a series of follow-up courses on a specific topic. For instance, Purdue University offers a series of three courses of French for Business as part of a Business French minor (Purdue University, n.d.), while the University of Connecticut offers a series of three courses of French for engineering as part of a dual-degree program in French and engineering (University of Connecticut, n.d.). Other institutions diversify their offering with a wider range of professional sectors. For example, Case Western Reserve University's catalog listed courses in Business French, Medical French, and French for Diplomacy and International Relations (Case Western Reserve University, n.d.). As for CUNY Brooklyn College, their catalog listed a total of six FPP courses, including courses covering less common professional sectors such as French for the Arts, French for the Media, French for Social Work, or French for Criminal Justice (Brooklyn College, n.d.). Some departments offer FPP certificate programs, minors, or tracks. Some others have created majors that combine language study with professional fields. While some of these are for languages more generally, such as a B.A. in Languages and Cultures for the Professions at Iowa State University (Iowa State University, n.d.) or a major in Languages and World Business at the University of Tennessee (University of Tennessee, n.d.), others offer degree programs focusing exclusively on French. For example, Penn State University offers a B.S. in French Studies, with options in business and in engineering (Penn State University, n.d.) and Auburn University offers a B.A. in French and International Trade (Auburn University, n.d.). Other programs require two Bachelor's degrees, including one in a second language. For instance, the international dual degree programs at the University of Rhode Island deliver one B.A. in a language and one B.S. in international business, pharmacy, textiles and fashion, etc. (University of Rhode Island, n.d.).

Regarding the diversity of course topics offered, our results highlighted the large proportion of business French courses in FPP course offerings, thus mirroring the trends identified by Long & Uscinski (2012). The choice of course topics offered in each institution may depend on several factors. Courses may be created to complement existing programs on a particular campus. One study showed that 70% of departments offering business French courses had a Business School in the same institution (Long & Uscinski, 2012). The local job market or local community can also be a driver of course offerings. For example, Duke University developed a course exploring business and entrepreneurship in the francophone world, including a community-based component that engages students with French-speaking business owners in Durham, North Carolina (Duke University, n.d.). Course topics may also depend on instructors' academic background or pedagogical training. For instance, since 2013, the Embassy of France in the United States, in partnership with the Paris Ile-de-France Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has offered a series of training workshops for instructors willing to implement FPP curriculum. Each workshop is focused on one specific professional sector, such as teaching French for business, teaching French for international relations, and teaching French for health, thereby helping to diversify the range of professional topics that instructors may develop (Embassy of France in the U.S., n.d.). These workshops have led to the creation of numerous new courses at US colleges and universities related to these topics, which are sometimes enhanced with opportunities for students to pass an exam and obtain a professional French diploma conferred by the Paris Ile-de-France Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Paris Ile-de-France Chamber of Commerce and Industry, n.d.).

Results from our questionnaire indicated a significant student demand not only for this type of courses (with a high percentage of students who would like to enroll again in a FPP course), but also for a more diversified course offering. This finding demonstrates a significant mismatch with the existing course supply identified in US colleges and universities (see Figure 2). French for international relations courses, identified as the first preferred course topic among students (chosen by 57% of respondents), represented only 2.5% of the 2019–2020 FPP course offerings. French for law and justice (chosen by 40% of respondents) also exemplifies the mismatch between the current course offerings and students' demand, as this course topic represented only 0.7% of the 2019–2020 FPP course offerings. The same discrepancy between supply and demand is present in other professional sectors identified, and represents an opportunity for departments to expand and diversify their course offerings to attract and retain students based on their interests. In parallel, a report of the New American Economy (2017) showed that French was especially in-demand in sectors like humanitarian aid, insurance, and health care, thereby providing an additional opportunity for departments to attract and retain students based on the job market reality. No specific data allow us to speculate on the reasons for such a mismatch between the supply of courses and market demand. However, it would be very useful to identify whether it is rather due, for instance, to institutions' unawareness of market reality, a lack of specialized pedagogical curricula, or a lack of adequately trained instructors. Investigating those reasons would facilitate an improved matching between the supply of trained students and market demand. From a higher education institution's perspective, it is also important to highlight that developing FPP—and more generally LSP—courses and programs can be particularly astute when we consider the data on declining language enrollments. For instance, the University of Rhode Island has had success with such a strategy, considering that, between 2013 and 2016, the number of students majoring in languages grew from 511 to 655 and attributing this 28-percent increase to the number of internationally focused programs, including engineering, business, and computer science (University of Rhode Island, 2019). The

development of FPP programs may therefore help institutions maintain programs and potentially increase enrollment numbers, offering students a direct pathway to professional preparation and growth.

Finally, our questionnaire data regarding the intended careers of students showed that they represent a pool of prospective young professionals who are trained to use French in a professional context, and our results demonstrated that almost half of them will seek jobs in the United States—potentially in positions requiring French proficiency (ACTFL, 2019; New American Economy, 2017). However, only a slight majority of students declared they thought French would be useful in their intended career, which may show that there is a gap in student understanding of the usefulness of French. When polled, for instance, US-Americans cite Spanish as the most useful second language to learn (60%), often to the detriment of other languages, which are less in demand, but nonetheless sought after by employers (YouGov Cambridge, 2019).

### **Conclusion and Perspectives**

The data collected in this study provide an analysis of the current environment for FPP courses in US undergraduate education and a critical overview of profiles and motivations of students enrolled. This will be especially useful for French instructors and departments interested in developing and implementing this type of course in their institution. The data also provide a strong call for a greater diversity of course offerings, as well as the expansion of FPP courses more generally across a greater number of US institutions of higher education.

Further research could replicate this analysis of course offerings over, for example, a five- to ten-year period, to analyze the evolution of FPP course offerings at US colleges and universities, both in terms of number and variety of courses, perhaps including graduate courses. Specific attention could also be paid to the proportion of FPP courses among the entire French course offering, which could show that there is room for an expansion of FPP courses without dominating a more traditional curriculum. In 2007, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages was underlining the necessity for language departments to transform and diversify their programs, calling for a “broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole” (MLA, 2007). Similarly, the design of a new survey distributed to all students enrolled in a French course in a US higher education institution—not only FPP—would help evaluate the demand for such courses, as well as students’ perspectives about using French in their intended career. Identifying the discipline of their other major or minor could also be useful to determine which FPP course topics would best suit their profiles. Additionally, surveys geared towards alumni could help us analyze the adequacy of these courses in preparing French-speaking professionals entering the job market. Finally, faculty surveys and syllabus analysis would help pinpoint common elements of FPP courses, with the goals of highlighting best practices in content instruction and pedagogical approaches.

*Acknowledgements:* The authors wish to thank all French instructors and departments that accepted to share the survey with their students and/or gave feedback on their course offerings. The authors extend their gratitude to Elizabeth Durling (Georgetown University) for the preliminary data collection, and Mathieu Ausseil and Rebecca Duncan (Educational Affairs Department of the Embassy of France in the United States) for their feedback on the article.

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## Appendix A. Copy of the Online Questionnaire

### French for Professional Purposes Courses at US Universities

#### Content of the survey

Conducted by the Education Department of the Embassy of France in the United States, this survey is intended for undergraduate students enrolled in a FPP course at a US college or university during the 2019–2020 academic year. Examples of FPP courses include French for the Professions, French for Business, French for International Relations, French for Health, etc.

The objective of this survey is to better identify student profiles and expectations. The estimated time to complete the survey is not more than 5 minutes; participation is on a voluntary basis. No personal data are collected in this survey.

Thank you very much in advance for your time.

#### Student Profile

1. What is the name of your college/university?
2. In which state is it located?
3. What is your level of study?
  - First year
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
4. Are you majoring in French or Francophone Studies?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Undeclared
5. Are you minoring in French or Francophone Studies?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Undeclared

#### French Studies

6. For how many years have you been studying French?
7. How would you evaluate your current level?  
*The levels indicated in brackets refer to the levels of proficiency described in the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages \(CEFR\)](#).*
  - Beginner (A1)

- Elementary (A2)
  - Intermediate (B1)
  - Upper intermediate (B2)
  - Advanced (C1)
  - Fluent/Complete proficiency (C2)
8. Please specify the name of the course of FPP you are enrolled in or have been enrolled in during the 2019-2020 academic year.  
*If possible, please include the code of the course, for example: FR401 French for Health. If you have been attending more than one course this year, please select the most recent one.*
9. Is this course a requirement of your major or minor, or is it an elective course?
- Required course
  - Elective course (chosen from among a variety of offerings)
10. What is your primary motivation for attending this course?
- To diversify and expand my general knowledge of French
  - To develop my ability to communicate in French in a professional environment
  - To learn vocabulary used in specific professional sectors
  - Other
11. Would you like to enroll in or have the possibility to enroll in another professional French course next year?
- Yes
  - No
  - Not concerned (senior year)
12. If you had the opportunity to enroll in the following professional courses, which would be your preferred topics? Please select a maximum of 4 topics.  
*If you are currently enrolled in a Business French course, you can include it in your preferences.*  
*Please only select courses that would actually enroll in.*
- French for Business
  - French for International Relations/Diplomacy
  - French for Health
  - French for the Humanitarian Sector
  - French for Tourism
  - French for Science, Technology, or Engineering
  - French for Journalism/Communication
  - French for Design/Fashion
  - French for the Environment
  - French for Law and Justice
  - French for Gastronomy

*Note.* the order of choices was randomized for each respondent.

**After Your Studies**

13. After your studies, do you intend to search for a job:
  - In the United States
  - In a French-speaking country
  - Abroad (not necessary in a French-speaking country)
  - I don't know
  
14. Do you think French will be useful in your future career?
  - Yes, I cannot efficiently perform in my intended career without speaking French
  - Yes, it will be a real asset
  - Not necessarily, but it could make a difference
  - No, I learn French for other reasons
  - I don't know

**Appendix B. Number of 4-Year Colleges and Universities with French Programs Offering at least One French for Professional Purposes Course per State**  
(see following page)

