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Undergraduate Perceptions of the Value of Studying Spanish: The Role for Spanish for Specific Purposes

Abstract: This article presents the findings of a study, conducted at a large public university, examining the perceptions of beginner Spanish students toward language learning and its value for their future careers. The study addressed several key themes: students' primary motivations for taking Spanish, their perceptions of its value for education and career goals, and how course content could better align with their interests. It also examined students' awareness of advanced language courses with a Spanish for specific purposes (SSP) focus and explored ways departments could improve marketing strategies to promote upper-level courses and encourage continued enrollment. Results indicate that while many students reported enrolling in Spanish I and II primarily due to college requirements, a significant number expressed positive perceptions about language study for personal enrichment, social connections, and career advancement. Notably, almost half of respondents indicated a desire to pursue additional Spanish courses beyond these first two levels. Initially, students rated the workplace value of Spanish low but later acknowledged its employability advantages. Findings reveal a lack of awareness regarding available language courses, underscoring the need for improved marketing strategies to promote upper-level offerings that align with students' interests. This study aimed to provide valuable insights for instructors, faculty, and administrators in enhancing language program relevance and student engagement.

Keywords: business, employability, healthcare professionals, languages for specific purposes, motivation, Spanish for specific purposes, undergraduate education

Introduction

By 2050, the Spanish-speaking population in the United States, including native speakers, heritage, and Spanish as second language speakers, is estimated to reach 27.5% (Vitores, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). With this growing population of Spanish speakers, the utility of Spanish proficiency will be key as university students enter the workplace. This is particularly true in business to reach a unique consumer base with marketing, in social services and healthcare to serve patients and the community, as well as in other areas such as law enforcement and legal work (Martínez et al., 2021). Although the demand for Spanish skills in the workplace seems obvious to some, this demand is not always clear to college students. The most recent Modern Language Association (MLA) report shows that although Spanish has the most students, the overall enrollment in Spanish—like nearly all other languages taught in the United States—showed a significant decline between 2016 and 2021 (Lusin et al., 2023).

While language enrollment has suffered losses across campuses (Furman et al., 2007; MLA, 2007; Jaschik, 2018), languages for specific purposes (LSP) and career-related courses have been experiencing increased interest (Doyle, 2019; Looney & Lusin, 2019; Lusin et al.,

2023). This trend across world language departments suggests that students may be motivated to study a language based on the practical value an LSP/career-related language course can provide, and some departments are developing innovative courses to meet this demand. Language departments have reformed traditional language teaching approaches (Doyle, 2019), developed new courses (Doyle, 2018; Long, 2017) and provided experiential learning offerings (e.g., Abbott & Martínez, 2018). Instructors have responded proactively to pedagogical shifts (Serafini & Torres, 2015), including domain analysis for non-specialist instructors (Lear, 2021). However, student voices have often been largely absent from this conversation. Insights gathered in the current research offer valuable guidance for instructors in refining course design and creating new offerings, while also equipping department chairs with data to advocate for the importance of Spanish language education to university administration. LSP courses, which focus on real-world applications in fields like business and healthcare, attract students seeking practical language skills that align with their career goals (Serafini & Torres, 2015). By emphasizing specific professional contexts, universities respond to student interest that goes beyond traditional language or literature studies, supporting their aspirations for career-oriented, relevant language skills.

At this crossroads of shifting language enrollments, it is timely to explore effective strategies for engaging and motivating students who are early in their language studies, in order to attract more students to language courses, improve retention, and promote progression into advanced courses. The present study examines beginner Spanish students' attitudes and motivations for language learning through a survey that examined the role LSP may have on their decisions for language study. The study findings offer implications and conclusions that demonstrate the need for language and career awareness-raising strategies aligned with students' perceptions and expectations. The survey tool developed for this study can be adapted for implementation on other campuses and for additional languages, broadening its applicability and impact.

Literature Review

This study examined the interests and needs of students in large introductory Spanish courses, highlighting how universities can address demands that extend beyond traditional language or literature studies. By focusing on factors that directly influence student motivation and course selection, the research explored key areas such as the relevance of course content, marketing strategies for retaining students in advanced levels, and overall student engagement. These insights are critical for understanding how undergraduates perceive the role of LSP courses within their degree programs.

A leading model to begin the discussion on language learning and motivation is the L2 (second language) Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009). This model, grounded in Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory and Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of possible selves, posits that integrating language learning into one's future self-image significantly influences L2 learning choices and behaviors. The model's key constructs, the ideal L2 self, the "ought-to" L2 self, and the L2 learning experience, can help us understand how students' aspirations, external pressures, and the learning environment shape their motivation.

According to Dörnyei (2009), the ideal L2 self reflects a learner's vision of themselves as a successful second language user, fueling motivation through personal aspirations. The ought-to L2 self represents the influence of external pressures and obligations, such as societal or family

expectations. The L2 learning experience encompasses the learner's current environment and experiences, directly impacting their engagement and attitudes toward language study. While research shows strong correlations between the ideal L2 self and subjective outcomes like self-reported effort (Henry & Cliffordson, 2017), its link to objective outcomes, such as course grades, is less consistent (Al-Hoorie, 2018). The ought-to L2 self, while showing weaker connections, still predicts effort in specific contexts (Papi et al., 2019). Papi et al. (2019) suggest that motivation strategies should be personalized rather than one-size-fits-all. If students have different motivations based on their goals (ought-to L2 self), research on self-regulation and learning strategies could benefit from considering these individual differences.

Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System has thus provided insights into how students' visions of their future selves, external pressures, and current learning experiences impact their motivation to learn a second language. This model has helped researchers and educators understand the complex factors that drive students to study a language, emphasizing that motivation is influenced by both internal desires and external influences. LSP courses provide a blended landscape for motivation—in many cases, students may be driven by both personal and professional aspirations simultaneously, as their inner desires align with their career paths and the demands of the workplace.

A study by Pratt (2023) examined Spanish educators' perceptions of their ability to maintain student interest, identifying factors such as engagement, motivation, feedback, and teacher-student relationships. The study highlighted discrepancies between teachers' perceptions and students' actual intentions, echoing findings from prior research (Pratt, 2010; Pratt et al., 2009 and 2021). Following up on this result, Pratt et al. (2021) conducted a study involving middle school, high school, and college students to compare their perceptions with those of teachers, particularly regarding students' ongoing interest in Spanish. The findings showed that most students believed their teachers had a positive influence on their interest in the language, with a significant correlation between this perception and the effectiveness of the course. Students who felt positively impacted were more likely to continue studying Spanish, emphasizing the importance of understanding teacher influence as a key factor in addressing language course elimination. Pratt et al. (2021) approached student motivation from a distinct angle compared to others, illustrating that, in many cases, students' learning experiences are profoundly shaped by the positive and innovative environments cultivated by educators.

In response to student motivations and to increase interest in language courses, many departments have focused on modifying their offerings to promote experiential learning and to develop curricula focused on professional applications (Abbot & Lear, 2010; Belpolliti & Pérez, 2019; Brandl & Rodríguez, 2020; Doyle, 2019; Gollin-Kies et al., 2015; Lear, 2019; Long, 2017; Miller et al., 2023). While educators have increased the integration of Spanish for specific purposes (SSP) to meet their perceptions of students' interests and needs (Sánchez-López, 2010), there remains a lack of empirical data reflecting actual student perceptions in this area (Martinsen, 2015). This gap underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how students value the practical benefits of language study within their broader educational and career goals.

A survey of departmental offerings introduced to address these curricular changes in French programs can be found in Bouche and Reisinger (2021), who analyzed both supply and demand for French for professional purposes (FPP) courses in US post-secondary institutions. Their study investigated how many four-year institutions offer FPP courses, the variety within those offerings, and the profiles and interests of enrolled students. The findings revealed that while most institutions with French programs (320 in total) do offer FPP courses, nearly 74%

provide only a single option. Student survey responses underscored strong demand for FPP courses, with many expressing eagerness to enroll in more than one. However, a notable gap emerged between student interest and actual course availability. For example, while 57% of students showed interest in French for international relations, only 2.5% of such courses were available in 2019–2020. Similarly, although 40% of students preferred French for law and justice, these courses made up just 0.7% of offerings. This misalignment highlights an opportunity for departments to diversify their course offerings to better match student preferences—a realization that has informed our current study at our university campus.

In today's educational environment of competing programs of study, the work of language educators not only requires linguistic and pedagogical training, but also the ability to develop course offerings to align with student interest and needs, as outlined above. Simultaneously, instructors must acquire and apply marketing strategies to ensure the growth and sustainability of language programs. These responsibilities underscore the importance of retention efforts within the broader context of demonstrating the continued relevance and value of language studies and the humanities. Cognizant of this importance, Burke and Ceo-DiFrancesco (2022) conducted a study on improving the recruitment and retention of world language teacher education majors. The authors identified that the shortage in teacher education programs is linked to a need for more than just financial support from federal and state governments. They emphasize the importance of strategic collaboration among world language teachers, teacher educators, and pre-service teachers to strengthen advocacy efforts aimed at recruiting and retaining teacher candidates. Their study found that recruitment practices like “shadow days” and social media outreach effectively increased interest in teacher licensure programs. Study participants emphasized the importance of experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad and field experiences, in promoting student engagement and retention. Social media and high-impact learning practices were identified as valuable tools for attracting and retaining students in these programs.

In a similar vein, Kissau (2020) undertook a multi-year initiative to boost enrollment in a graduate program for aspiring world language teachers. Several strategies were applied, including program-level changes, curricular redesign, and reducing total credit hours to lower costs and compete with alternative licensure programs. To further attract students, the program offered an accelerated path to an advanced master's degree. Additionally, the faculty forged strategic partnerships with world language stakeholders, school districts, the graduate school, and external funding agencies to support recruitment efforts. These findings demonstrate the benefit of assessing and revamping programs and courses to meet the rapidly changing demands of students, while also partnering with entities outside of academia.

Building on the past studies that have sought to understand student needs and motivations in relation to language requirements and professional careers, the current study was designed to further the understanding of one university's specific context of learners through a survey, with the aim to help faculty align their departmental efforts more effectively with the motivations and needs of their students. In the following section, we outline the motivation behind the study and describe the methodology, providing the research context, study participants, and the survey instrument. We then summarize the study results, which reflect the attitudes of beginner Spanish students towards language study and their perceptions of its relevance to their future career goals.

Study Objectives

This study sought to address the gap in understanding the needs of beginner-level university students, particularly regarding their engagement in introductory Spanish courses and their future labor market opportunities requiring language. Building on existing literature, the research explored the factors that motivate students at the beginner level, identified strategies for making course content more relevant to students, determined what types of advanced language courses might encourage further study in Spanish, and how to market such courses. Additionally, it considered how real-world applications of Spanish in multiple career fields can influence student commitment to progress toward advanced Spanish studies.

Methodology

Research Context and Subjects

This study was conducted at the University of Florida (UF), a public land-grant research institution, where students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences must fulfill a two-semester language requirement. The study was implemented in the spring semester of 2022 after obtaining an exempt approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. At the time of the study, there were approximately 55,000 students enrolled in the university, among them 34,000 undergraduates.

The target population selected for this study was undergraduate students enrolled in beginner-level I and II Spanish courses (the first and second semester courses). This group was chosen as the ideal population to gain a broad understanding of perceptions of Spanish language studies since these courses consist of students from all disciplines taking the course as a requirement. The introductory Spanish courses are part of a coordinated program led by a faculty member specializing in second language learning. All courses follow a communicative approach aligned with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) performance-to-proficiency model. Students complete preparatory work, including vocabulary and grammar exercises, cultural readings, and virtual exchange meetings at home, while class time focuses on communicative activities and group work. Both classroom activities and formative assessments are guided by ACTFL Can-Do Statements and World Readiness Standards (ACTFL, 2012, 2017).

To ensure a comprehensive and equitable distribution, the research team collaborated closely with the Director of Spanish Language Instruction, obtaining necessary permissions and determining the most effective method for delivering the survey across all undergraduate course sections. Students were given an assignment in their Learning Management System (LMS) that invited them to participate in the survey anonymously and voluntarily, with no consequences for choosing not to participate. This assignment was included in their courses as part of a research study titled “Engagement with the Spanish Department” and was graded on a complete/incomplete basis.

The Survey

Following the model from the Bouche and Reisinger (2021) study examining student demand for intermediate-level French for professional purposes courses, the researchers

developed the survey instrument in collaboration with two UF Spanish language and linguistics faculty members. To ensure clarity and accuracy, the survey was pilot tested with randomly selected undergraduate students. The final survey is comprised of 17 items, including both quantitative (yes/no or multiple-choice items) and qualitative (open-ended items designed to elicit detailed feedback on the quantitative items) (see Appendix A).

The survey included items designed to gather responses on five key themes:

- (1) Why are students taking Spanish?
- (2) Do students see learning Spanish as an asset in their education?
- (3) How could courses be made more relevant to students?
- (4) How aware are students of unique world language courses being offered beyond the beginner levels?
- (5) How can departments better market unique upper-level courses?

To guarantee representative sampling, descriptive statistics were implemented to evaluate survey responses. Themes were identified and categorized using line-by-line coding for the open-ended responses, in accordance with qualitative data analysis methods (Charmaz, 2006).

Researchers assigned codes to the answers, created categories, and identified themes. They then examined the coded data and settled any differences by consensus and discussion.

Results

The anonymous, online survey was distributed to 688 students in Spanish I and II during the Spring 2022 semester. Initially, 474 responses were counted; however, because nine students did not complete the survey, this resulted in 465 responses, yielding a response rate of 67.5%. Because there was some fluctuation in total responses throughout the survey, as students sometimes left items blank, results are presented in percentages in addition to indicating the number of respondents for each question described.

The initial questions sought basic demographic data of the respondents, students enrolled in required 5-credit Beginner Spanish I (n=174, 37.4%) and II (n=291, 62.6%) courses. Each level had an average enrollment of 25 students per class, and respondents consisted of all class ranks: 31% (144) first-year, 27% (126) sophomore, 26.5% (123) junior, 14.8% (69) senior; and 0.65% (3) of them were international exchange students. The top majors represented by respondents were in the social and natural sciences: psychology: 10.53% (49 respondents); biology: 9.96% (46), political science: 8.39% (39); economics: 6.67% (31); criminology: 4.73% (22); computer science: 3.23% (15); biochemistry: 3.01% (14); anthropology: 2.15% (10); sociology: 2.15% (10); followed by humanities: English: 2.37% (10); and history: 3.65% (17). Other majors with fewer representatives among the respondents included behavioral and cognitive neuroscience, business management, mathematics, media, journalism and health science.

The following discussion of the results is organized according to the research themes listed above: (1) reasons for taking Spanish; (2) perceived value of the language; (3) perceived usefulness of courses and their content; (4) awareness of course options at the intermediate level and beyond; and (5) suggestions on ways to market courses. For each theme, the specific survey question numbers will be referenced within the presentation of results below.

Reasons for Taking Spanish

When asked to respond to a list of possible reasons for taking Spanish (Question 5), responses indicated the top five reasons for taking Beginner Spanish as: fulfillment of the language requirement (88%, 409/465); interest to communicate with friends and family in Spanish (44.3%, 206/465), improvement of Spanish previously studied (37.8%, 176/465); enjoyment of the language (33.5%, 156/465); and workplace needs (7.7%, 36/465). Eleven write-in responses showed a variety of reasons, including that students were planning a trip to a Spanish-speaking country soon, or that they recognized the connection to the large Spanish-speaking population in Florida.

Perceived Value of the Language

Two questions were posed to determine the perceived value of Spanish for students' futures. Question 6 sought to identify how students might use Spanish broadly, and participants were invited to check all options that applied. The top five options selected were: for social situations, 77.4% (360/465); work, 70.1% (326/465); vacation, 59.1% (275/465); internships, 18.5% (86/465); and academic research, 13.3% (62/465). A small number of respondents (8.4%, 39/465) selected the option that they would never use it. Question 7 required a yes or no response on whether students thought being proficient in Spanish might help them for future job searches. It also solicited an open-ended explanation of why they felt that way. The results indicated that 85% (394/461) of the respondents agreed that being proficient in Spanish would help for their future job searches; 12% (54/461) said it would not benefit, while 3% (13/461) were not sure about the benefits.

In the qualitative portion of Question 7 about how proficiency could help their future job search, four main focus areas emerged: general appreciation of other languages and cultures, the connection between work and languages, recognition of the significance of Spanish in the United States, and the value of internships and work abroad. The first focus area, represented by 34% (134/394) of respondents, reflects an appreciation for speaking other languages and understanding different cultures. While some responses touched on multiple themes, this area highlights the value participants placed on intercultural skills and their perceived professional advantages. Respondents here emphasized the importance of bilingualism and intercultural communication, which they believed could enhance their appeal as job candidates. For example, one participant remarked that "bilingualism is more appealing to employers than monolingualism."

The second focus area, arising from comments by 26% (102/394) of respondents, emphasized the strong connection between the Spanish language and professions. These participants stated that speaking Spanish would be necessary for them to interact effectively in their desired fields. In the open-ended responses, key words related primarily to healthcare were identified. However, there were also mentions of law, clients, construction, international businesses, and finance, indicating the diverse range of professions where Spanish proficiency is perceived as valuable. Sample student responses were: "Learning aspects of Spanish that relate more to science and medicine would be really beneficial!"; "Being unable or able to provide services in construction, pero no puedo. (*but I can't*)"; and "Learning how to speak to co-workers or bosses in a professional setting and learning how healthcare is perceived and gone about in Spanish places."

The third area, representing 16% (63/394) of respondents, highlighted students' perception of Spanish as a significant language in the United States. They recognized the importance of being able to speak the second-most spoken language in the United States. Some participants specifically mentioned their state and region, such as Florida and specifically South Florida, as locations where Spanish proficiency is particularly beneficial. Sample quotes out of the 406 qualitative responses of the value of Spanish in the United States were: "It is especially important to be bilingual in Spanish if I were to try to find work in South Florida."; and "Yes, there are many areas in Florida where Spanish is the only language for some. As a healthcare worker, this is important because it is important to not have a language barrier while giving or receiving care."

Lastly, the fourth focus area, consisting of 7% (28/394) of respondents, indicated an interest in working abroad or experiencing internships overseas. These respondents saw Spanish proficiency as a way to increase their potential access to such opportunities. This small percentage aligns with the final survey question (17) which revealed that 91.3% (422/462) expressed their intention to work in the United States versus abroad.

Perceived Usefulness of Courses and their Content

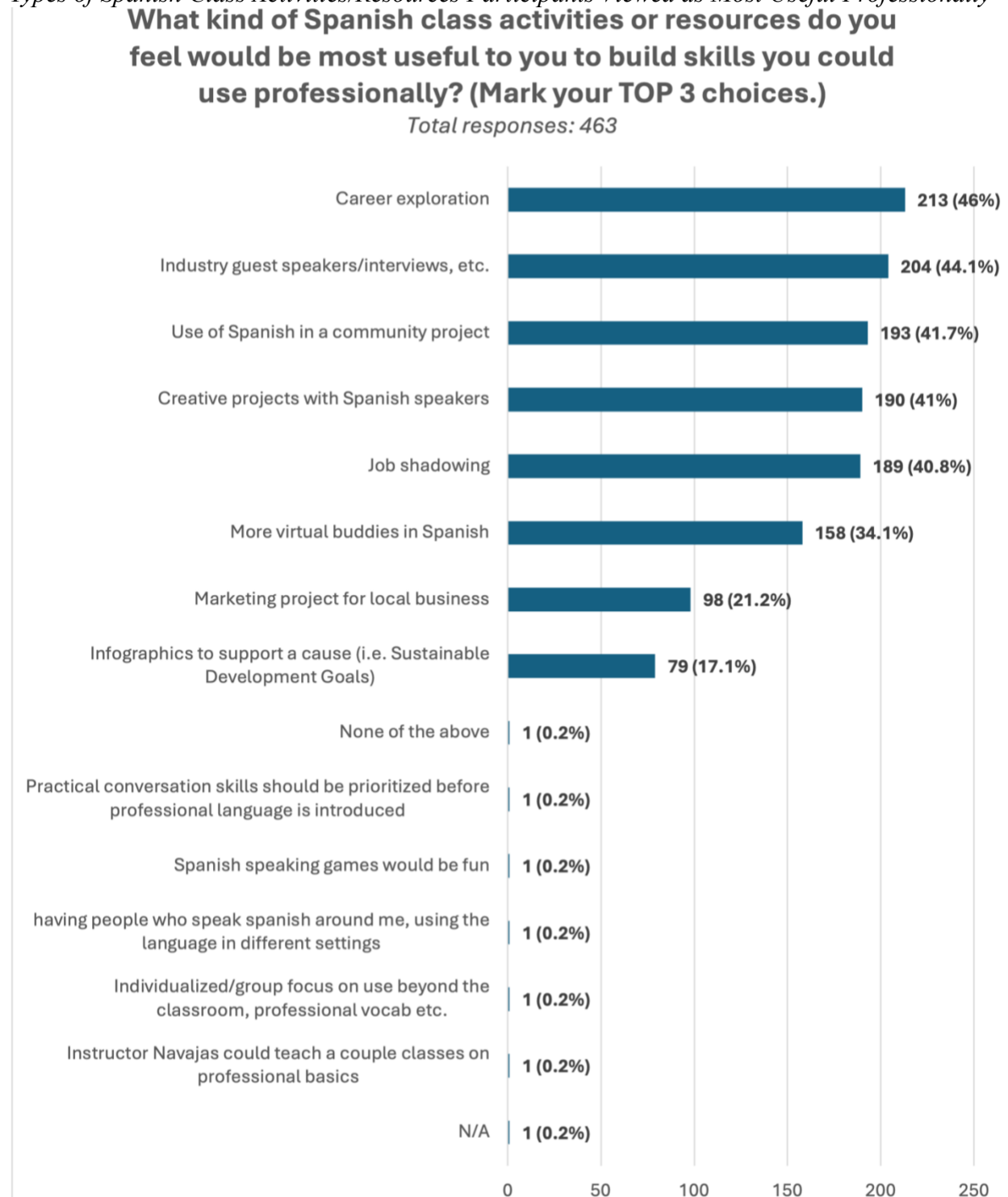
Another key aspect of this study was to examine student perception of the usefulness of beginner Spanish course materials and content. Questions 8-10 addressed this theme. Question 8 was a yes/no question that then solicited an explanation of either response choice (8a/b). It asked if students felt that the content in their current course was preparing them to use Spanish in ways that are relevant to their future. A majority of respondents, 82.8% (384/464), confirmed that the course content was relevant. Out of the 380 explanations provided (to 8a), some comments indicated that classes help their conversation skills and provide a foundational knowledge of the language: "The content in the course helps create a dialogue that is useful for social situations amongst peers. I feel that the 'flipped' format of the class is useful because it allows for more speaking time in class and in-person. This course encourages interaction in the form of speaking of Spanish, which has helped me gain confidence and improve my abilities." For the 17.2% (80/464) who responded that it did not meet their needs (8b), the primary reason was because they did not see it as relevant to them personally or professionally. For example, some comments on not being able to use language at work were: "...most of my job will involve writing code, so being proficient in Spanish will have no benefits" and "My work is in specific historical libraries that do not contain Spanish."

To obtain a more thorough understanding of what motivates students to pursue studying language, Question 9 inquired whether short modules with a professional or other "purpose" might interest them. Nearly half, 45% (208/465) of the participants responded yes, and 203 respondents provided possible topics they would like to see offered (Question 9a). Upon analysis of these qualitative responses to possible purposes of interest, respondents listed general workplace goals (76) and healthcare (75) most often, followed by business and law (39) and other career fields, such as engineering, construction, money services, cultural and arts, and technology (13 in total). Respondents provided further input on desired coursework focus through statements such as the following: "Learning how I might conduct myself in an interview and what proper things to say would be. It also would probably be good to know how a work email is constructed"; "Learning how to have professional conversations in a customer service environment or learning how to respond to common requests in the workplace"; "Learning about

healthcare communication and how to serve patients that speak Spanish”; and “Spanish-speaking in a business field/marketing and advertising to a Spanish population.”

Figure 1

Types of Spanish Class Activities/Resources Participants Viewed as Most Useful Professionally



To supplement the student input on desired course content and materials, Question 10 sought to identify what students perceive as engaging learning tasks. Participants were asked to select their top three choices from a list according to what kind of Spanish class activities they considered might be most useful to build skills they could use professionally. As can be seen in Figure 1 above, out of 463 responses the top three choices were: “career exploration” 46% (213/463), followed by “industry guest speakers, interviews” chosen by 44% (204/463), and finally “use Spanish in a community project” selected by 42% (193/463). Two other options selected with 40.8% (189/463) of interest were “job shadowing” and doing “creative projects with Spanish” 41% (190/463). The remaining responses and percentages included activities such as infographics, marketing projects, and virtual buddies.

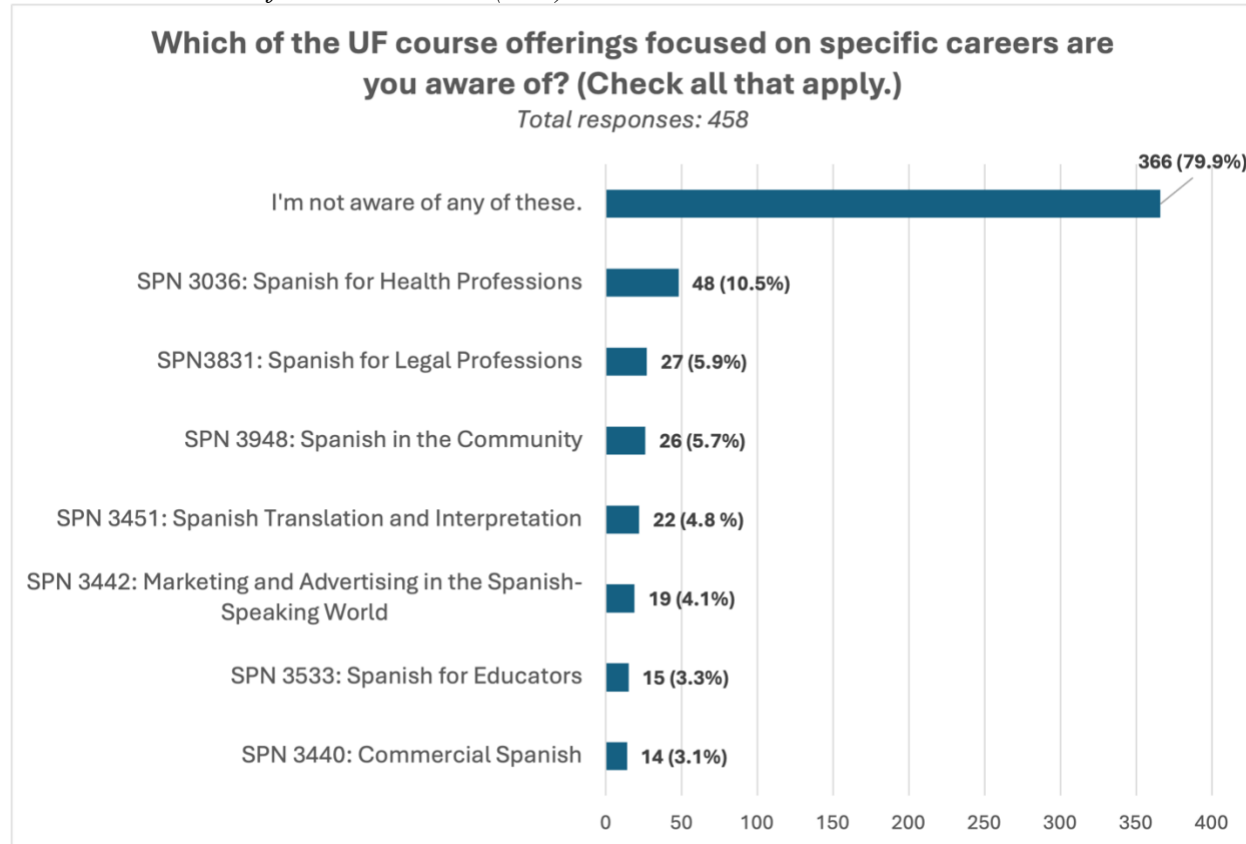
After asking students about their interest in course content, Question 11 asked whether they planned to continue taking more advanced Spanish after they met the beginner level requirements. A little over half of the participants (52.7%, 245/463) responded negatively, whereas 40.4% (185/463) planned to continue; unsure responses comprised the remaining percentage of 6.9% (33/463). Participants had the chance to elaborate on why they would or would not continue Spanish language studies (Question 11a), and of those 218 responses, the most frequent response for continuing study was “language requirement.” Other responses listed for continuing to study Spanish included a desire to improve fluency, to continue learning, to fulfill their major/minor requirements, etc. Of the 272 responses for reasons provided on not continuing language study (Question 11b), the top three were that their major had limited electives 38% (103/272), lack of time due to graduating soon 37% (101/272), and 28% (76/272) were not interested.

Thus far, we have presented results related to student motivation to study Spanish and where their interests lie for content that is more applicable to their future work life. In the next two research themes, our attention shifts to whether students are aware of the unique course options that are available at the intermediate and upper levels, and how they think the department can best promote or “market” these courses to make students more aware of these opportunities.

Awareness of Course Options at the Intermediate Level and Beyond

As can be seen in Figure 2 below for Question 12, the top three career-focused courses in the UF Spanish program that students reported being aware of were: Spanish for Health 10.5% (48/458), Spanish for Legal Professions 5.9% (27/458), and Spanish for the Community 5.7% (26/458). The large majority of respondents (79.9%, 366/458) reported not being aware of content courses focused on practical and professional applications of Spanish.

When participants were asked what other professional course topics they might be interested in seeing offered (Question 14), the top three mentioned were psychology (68%, 282/414), general professional language training (58%, 238/414), and cultural studies courses for global issues (52%, 214/414). The last three course themes listed in descending order were environmental studies, engineering, and agricultural studies.

Figure 2*Student Awareness of Career-Related (LSP) Courses*

Concerning the assessment of student awareness of professional-themed courses, Questions 15 and 16 focused on study abroad offerings. Responses to Question 15 showed that most of the participants (61%, 282/462) were aware of the opportunities for learning Spanish in an immersion setting abroad; however, 39% (179/462) were not. The open-ended question (15a) aimed to determine which professional course topics students might prefer to take in a study abroad context. Most students (78%, 363/465) listed healthcare, international business, legal studies, social sciences, and environmental sustainability. Out of the options provided for preferred components of a professionally focused study abroad (Question 16), the top three choices of the 459 respondents were internship 74% (339/459), job shadowing 62% (283/459), and interaction with professionals 56% (256/459).

Student Suggestions on Ways to Market Courses

To supplement the questions on student awareness of course offerings, their content interests, and whether they plan to continue studying Spanish, we solicited student feedback on the best way to reach them through course promotional strategies. There were 415 responses for Question 13, an open-ended question of how to best market more advanced level professionally focused courses. These responses were coded and tallied, resulting in four main categories: instructor publicizing in class (38%, 159/415); marketing materials (emails, flyers, newsletters,

social media) (36%, 149/415); university interaction with other departments and advisors (13%, 52/415); and guest speakers (9%, 39/415).

Discussion

Many of the survey results reported above reveal unexpected contrasts that merit further examination. As might be expected, for example, most respondents stated they are taking beginning level Spanish courses (I and II) due to the college requirements. However, there were other options selected that give some hope for more intrinsic reasons to pursue language study such as for personal enrichment, social relationships, and career advantages. It is encouraging to observe that nearly half of the students reported they would benefit from taking more Spanish courses and just under half said they would continue language study. While students did not seem to perceive Spanish as useful for work at present, once asked specifically about use of Spanish in the future, the vast majority did feel they would benefit from Spanish in terms of a competitive advantage in the workplace. Once the question drew attention to a “future” possible focus, the responses demonstrated a greater recognition of Spanish for career-related applications, be it in academia or beyond. This could indicate that instructors in language classrooms need to be more explicit with students about the practical value of language, as opposed to presuming students will make that connection on their own. This might be done through anecdotal real-life examples that are relevant to a theme being covered, having virtual or in-person guest speakers share their professional use of language, or including brief opening or closing activities in class of short language and career video testimonials available on ACTFL’s Language Connects Foundation website (LCF, n.d.).

Students also recognized the importance of speaking Spanish in the United States, especially in the state of Florida, where there is a large Spanish-speaking population. This finding aligns with a 2019 YouGov Cambridge survey, which revealed that Americans viewed Spanish as the most useful second language due to its high demand among employers (YouGov, 2019). Qualitative responses further demonstrated that many students did see the future application of Spanish language use in growing fields such as healthcare, business development, and marketing tied to Spanish-speaking populations. Although a majority of respondents were positive and expressed that their Spanish course content is appropriate, it is nevertheless imperative to understand those who responded that the courses were not meeting their perceived needs, that there was a lack of interaction in classes, or that the courses do not have a “real-life” purpose. Instructors could consider adapting their activities to what students may see as more useful in daily life. Assigning tasks that have students intentionally observe, identify, and take note of any Spanish-speaking presence in their community and daily life might help them “notice” and ideally appreciate the value of what they are learning in class. This could be done by journaling with basic vocabulary and present tense structures and then having students share their findings in a discussion forum. Students could compile lists by categories and potentially do a mapping activity of Spanish use observed in their town, city or neighborhood. While “noticing” has been suggested as a hypothesis for learning linguistic features (Schmidt, 2001), it may apply as well in terms of bringing attention to the presence of Spanish language use in learners’ community and help develop appreciation of other cultures.

The idea of having short modules in beginner courses that focus on professional and specific purposes was well received, with almost half of respondents indicating interest, and about half of the respondents providing career areas they might pursue. The top module

“specific” use choice was healthcare, which coincides with Florida's future employment needs, as healthcare is one of the fastest growing industry needs in the state (WSER, 2023). While offering an LSP focused approach and content at the beginner level has met with some resistance over the years, this notion is changing and becoming more accepted and integrated into higher education courses and LSP content at the high school level (Abbott, 2015; Fees, 2023; Martinsen, 2015; Risner et al., 2017). Basic vocabulary and simple communicative situations for the careers desired by students are possible to integrate early on in language courses and can be done with instructor creativity and connections to ACTFL Standards and Can-Do Statements.¹

When provided with ideas of what course activities or “components” might make beginner Spanish courses more relevant and useful for professional purposes, responses revealed a gap between the classroom and the real world, and a desire to break down the walls between the classroom and the context of local and regional communities. Indeed, as noted by Risner and Egusquiza (2016), language departments may benefit by assessing the social and industry needs of their area to guide curricular offerings according to their local context and workforce demands. Instructors can be intentional about assigning relevant and scaffolded tasks that guide students to discover professional opportunities that require some level of language proficiency in their own community and state. This can be done by assigning students to search specifically for global industries in their area, gather statistics on languages spoken in their region, and identify job ads that seek Spanish speakers. Due to the growing number of Spanish speakers in the United States, many official chamber and economic development websites are now in both Spanish and English. Student findings could be summarized in basic Spanish through charts and infographics, then shared with the class for comparison.

Based on student choices for specific components of professionally focused study abroad courses, the desire for internships, job shadowing, and professional interactions were highly ranked. These types of work-related activities, some abroad and some in the United States, are already a core part of many professional school programs. It is a bold step, but language instructors might consider how to approach faculty in these other colleges to merge the existing programs, courses, and agreements with industry partners that have a global focus and need language skills.

Bayliss and Rossomondo (2018) acknowledge that the divide between beginning and advanced undergraduate language courses reflects a traditional separation between “language” (grammar, writing, and conversation) and “content” (literature, culture, linguistics). This structure creates a hierarchy that places greater value on advanced courses and positions language teachers as subordinate to content teachers. This separation also causes disconnection and hinders collaboration between faculty across levels, potentially reducing the effectiveness of curricula in meeting students’ developmental and interdisciplinary needs. Integrated thematic units across levels could ensure that language and content are taught together from the beginning, fostering continuity and mutual relevance throughout the curriculum. For example, a beginner-level Spanish course could explore themes such as healthcare or immigration in Latin America through simplified readings, targeted vocabulary on migration and identity, and scaffolded discussions. As students advance, the same theme could be revisited and expanded upon in higher-level courses, incorporating complex texts, critical essays, and debates. This progression not only reinforces language skills but also enables students to engage with complex

¹ For an example of how modules or short activities can be integrated at a variety of levels from beginner onward, see Risner (2025), a high school Spanish textbook consisting of LSP-focused inserts for each unit from Levels 1 to 3.

cultural and theoretical issues, demonstrating the interconnectedness of language proficiency and content knowledge. In addition to the need for more relevant and more engaging curricular design and content, there is a need for colleges and departments to tie unique and experiential course offerings to language that can connect across disciplines (Simonsen, 2022).

The survey results demonstrate that beginner level students are not aware of course offerings or programs that might capture their interest to continue at the advanced level. Though language faculty are typically not formally trained in marketing, respondents' suggestions provide ideas for better advertising such offerings while simultaneously raising awareness of the value of LSP, helping students make the connection between language skills and professional opportunities early on. The simplest suggestion was merely having instructors mention courses and programs available at the intermediate level so students can think about them with enough time to plan and match with their program of study. At large universities, teaching assistants could take on that task—facilitating by providing them with a template for their syllabi and online course shells.

As one respondent emphasized: “Without any doubt, instructors are the best advisors of their courses and students can discard an email invitation or a social media post, however, it will be harder to not listen, see or pay attention to a class presentation about the next courses available in their career paths.” This comment aligns with being open to instructor suggestions, similar to Pratt's (2023) finding that instructors can significantly influence student motivation and learning. To reduce the workload of this additional task of communicating options to students, Spanish instructors can enlist advanced students who already recognize the benefits of continuing their language learning and connecting their language knowledge to a future career through LSP courses. Collaborating with professors in disciplines like marketing and communications to propose real-world projects, such as creating language promotional materials, can provide students with practical experience while showcasing the relevance of language learning to their primary fields of study. Respondents also suggested inviting guest speakers to the classes to share experiences of how they use Spanish in their daily work—speakers could provide examples and motivate learners to continue language study.

Conclusion

The data gathered from this study allowed for a critical evaluation of undergraduate student motivation for taking Spanish at one institution. The results from this particular cohort make a compelling case for expanding LSP courses across more US institutions of higher learning, as well as for increasing the variety of course offerings designed to train graduate students to lead the field, as proposed by Ruggiero (2014) and Lafford (2018). Further research on more student populations is needed to delve deeper into these perspectives and understand how learners perceive the benefits of Spanish proficiency in their future professional and personal lives.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. While the survey results can serve as a starting point upon which language department administration can reflect, they do offer the views from just one campus context, thereby limiting generalizability. The study would need to be replicated elsewhere, with adjustments made to improve and adapt the survey questions. Adjustments should address, among other items, issues such as “double-barreled questions,” which can lead to ambiguous results. The order and wording of a few questions might benefit from revisions before others

implement the survey. In spite of the limitations, this study can serve as a model for other researchers to determine student perceptions on other campuses, broadening this single study's impact.

Meeting the diverse needs of students at the beginner level presents a significant challenge. However, systematically gathering input from a broad student population can help guide language programs in fostering greater motivation for continued language study beyond the required levels. Innovations in the beginner curriculum, such as the integration of real-world learning opportunities, along with a strategic focus on effectively marketing relevant and engaging upper-level courses, particularly LSP courses, could contribute to increased enrollment, improved retention, and better alignment of language programs with students' professional aspirations. While these changes will necessitate additional effort from both faculty and administration, the potential benefits in terms of enrollment, retention, and progression to advanced levels would enhance the overall quality and relevance of language programs.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Demographics

1. Course: SPN1130 SPN1131
2. Grade level: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior
3. Intended Majors: _____
4. Intended Minors: _____

Reasons for Taking Spanish

5. Why are you taking Spanish? (Check all that apply)
- ☐ I enjoy learning languages
 - ☐ I just want to meet language requirement
 - ☐ I need language for work
 - ☐ I have studied Spanish before and would like to improve it
 - ☐ I am interested in communicating with people in Spanish (family, friends, others)
 - ☐ Other (Explain) _____

Perceived Value of the Language

6. How do you think you might use Spanish in the future? (Check all that apply)
- ☐ Social situations (family, friends, meeting and talking to other people)
 - ☐ Work
 - ☐ Vacation
 - ☐ Academic Research
 - ☐ Internship
 - ☐ Won't use it
 - ☐ Other (Explain) _____
7. Do you think being fluent in Spanish will help you in your future job search? (Y/N)
Please explain your answer.

Student Perception of Usefulness of Courses and their Content

8. Do you feel the content in your current course is preparing you to use the language in ways that fit your future plans?
- 8a. If yes, how?
- 8b. If not, does it matter OR how would you like it to do that?
9. Would you be interested in short modules within beginner courses that relate to professional language use or some other specific purpose? Yes/No
- 9a. If yes, what might be some examples? (*learning how to navigate work situations, particular career fields such as engineering, law, healthcare, etc.*)

9b. If you are taking SPN1131 have you seen / note the existence in your course material any reference or application to the professional environment? Mark one.

Yes/No/Not in SPN1131

10. What kind of Spanish class activities or resources do you feel would be most useful to you to build skills you could use professionally? (Mark your TOP 3)

- ☐ use of language in community project
- ☐ infographics to support a cause (i.e. Sustainable Development Goals)
- ☐ marketing project for local business
- ☐ career exploration
- ☐ creative projects with native speakers
- ☐ more virtual buddies in target language
- ☐ job shadowing
- ☐ industry guest speakers/interviews, etc.
- ☐ Other

11. Do you plan to take more courses in Spanish? ___ Yes / ___ No / Other

11a. If yes, why? Why or why not?

11.b. If no, why not?

- ☐ Not interested
- ☐ Not useful
- ☐ Major has limited electives, so no space in schedule
- ☐ No time; graduating soon

Student Awareness of Course Options at the Intermediate Level and Beyond

12. Which of the UF courses focused on specific careers are you aware of? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ SPN3948 Spanish in the Community
- ☐ SPN3440 Commercial Spanish
- ☐ SPN3442 Marketing and Advertising in the Spanish-Speaking World
- ☐ SPN3553 Spanish for Educators
- ☐ SPN3036 Spanish for Health Professions
- ☐ SPN3451 Spanish Translation and Interpretation
- ☐ SPN3831 Spanish for Legal Professions
- ☐ I am not aware of any of these. SPN

Student Suggestions on Ways to Market Courses

13. How might we best promote courses for Spanish for professional use to students so that they know they have these advanced level course options?

14. If none of the current courses with a professional focus interest you, what would be titles of some that would? (Check your TOP 3 choices)

- ☐ Agricultural studies
- ☐ Engineering

- ☐ Environmental studies
- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ General professional training in target language
- ☐ Cultural studies courses connected to global issues like *Migration in the Global World*; *Film studies and identities*; *Health and Disease in World History*

Study Abroad with a Professional Focus/Future Job Venue Preference

15. Are you aware of UF's current study abroad programs with language training such as UF in Cusco (Experiential Learning for the Health Professions), UF in the Dominican Republic (Service Learning-education and health) ☐ Yes / ☐ No

15a. What other professional field program as a study abroad might interest you?

16. What components are most important in a program with a professional focus? (Check your TOP 3 choices)

- ☐ Internship
- ☐ Job shadowing
- ☐ Interaction with professionals in the country
- ☐ Language credits
- ☐ Cultural tours
- ☐ Homestay
- ☐ Consulting project

17. After your studies, do you intend to search for a job:

- ☐ In the United States
- ☐ In a Spanish-speaking country
- ☐ Elsewhere
- ☐ I don't know

