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Teaching Spanish at the University Level in the United States

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Topic: The Spanish language in the U.S. university

Summary: This report analyzes the situation of Spanish language in the U.S. university

Keywords: teaching, Spanish language, university, courses, college

Introduction

Like every year since 2009, the information in "El español: Una lengua viva. Informe 2015" (Fernández Vítores 2015), published by the Cervantes Institute on June 20 as part of the celebration of E Day or Spanish Language Day, presents a truly positive outlook. Aside from the usual demographic figures, such as the nearly 470 million people who speak Spanish as their native language, or close to

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the one hundred million that form part of the group with partial proficiency and learners of Spanish as a second or foreign language (L2), the report emphasizes the progressive consolidation of Spanish as a language of dissemination of knowledge (second most important language on Wikipedia by number of visits, compared to fifth place in 2014) or for its use in two of the most popular social networks: Facebook and Twitter (second most used language after English). Likewise, the report highlights impressive growth projections for the Spanish language in the United States (US), both at the demographic and academic levels -with approximately 8 million students studying Spanish as L2, totaling 20.3 million worldwide.

In the same collection of Reports from the Observatory, Rhodes and Pufahl (2014) offer a broad perspective on the teaching of Spanish in elementary and secondary education, based on a national survey conducted every 10 years (1987, 1997, 2008) by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) which points to a number close to five million students studying Spanish between elementary, secondary and vocational education (see also the chapter about the United States in the report "The world studies Spanish. 2014," by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport in Spain). Our objective in this report is to analyze the situation of the Spanish language at the university level in the US, comprising: (a) technical schools ("community/junior/technical colleges"), with two year programs that grant certifications of professional training or the first two years of a university degree; (b) colleges, whose programs are distributed over four years, and (c) universities, where college degree programs with are combined other graduate and doctoral programs. To this end, the next sections will offer, first, a brief overview of the Spanish language in the United States. Then, relevant statistical data will be presented, and the state of teaching Spanish at the university level will be discussed. Finally, the report will provide some prospects for the future.

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The current situation of the Spanish language in the United States

Although it is not the primary objective of this report, we believe that it is important to briefly review the situation of the Spanish language in the US in order to put into context what is happening at the university level.

The last calculation made by the United States Census Bureau in 2010 indicated that the population of Latino or Hispanic origin was 50.4 million, representing an increase of 43% compared to the year 2000 (Ennis, Rivers-Vargas and Albert 2012). The latest estimates that are made between censuses show that the number has already increased to 55.4 million, 17% of the total population (US Census Bureau 2014a). From that total, 35% are immigrants from Latin America and the remaining 65% were born in the US. To these, an estimated 9.7 million undocumented immigrants of Hispanic descent should be added. The total number, which is above 64 million, makes the US the second country with the second highest number of Spanish speakers, after only Mexico, and before Colombia, Spain and Argentina. Projections indicate that in 2060 more than 119 million, 28% of the population in the US, will be of Hispanic origin (US Census Bureau 2015).

From that Hispanic population, 74% currently speak Spanish at home. Fernández Vitores points out "more than 41.3 million have a native mastery of the Spanish language and the other 11.6 million can be assumed to have limited proficiency, with different levels of knowledge and use of the language" (Fernández Vítores 2015, 36). The projections indicate that the percentage of Hispanics that use Spanish at home could decrease up to 66% in 2020 (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013), which raises the question of whether the Spanish language will follow the same path as other languages, such as Italian or German, whose number of speakers has dropped considerably while the number of Americans with that ancestry has grown. It is difficult to know what will happen in the future because,

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on the one hand, studies indicate that the use of Spanish has decreased with each new generation of USA-born Hispanics, while on the other hand, there seems to be a clear desire among the Hispanic population to maintain the Spanish language. A 2012 survey indicates that 95% of Hispanics, including those born in the US, considered it important or very important that future generations of Hispanics in the US speak Spanish (Taylor et al. 2012). The latest report of the Cervantes Institute notes that the existence of a high proficiency in the Spanish language among the various generations of Hispanics indicates that the Hispanic population has reached a critical mass that allows their social integration without having to abandon the Spanish language. It also confirms that there is sufficiently broad supply of cultural, social and media productions in Spanish "to ensure Spanish speakers of the preservation of their language without having to make an excessive effort to achieve it" (Fernández Vítores 2015, 37).

Whatever the future holds, the fact is that at present the growth of the Hispanic community in the US has reached such a level that its influence is already noticeable in all areas, and with it the presence of the Spanish language in all aspects of life in this country. The number of newspapers, radio and television stations in Spanish continues to rise, and, what is more significant, its audience does as well (Fernández Vítores 2013). One example of this increasing importance is the fact that in June and July 2013 the Univision Spanish television network surpassed all English language television networks –FOX, NBC, CBS and ABC– as the most watched among the age group of 18-49 year olds, with 1.8 million viewers (Lopez 2013). On the job market, to speak and communicate in Spanish has become a determining factor that influences the attainment of a job and a desired salary (De la Garza, Cortina and Pinto 2010). At the political level, now that we are witnessing the campaign for the 2016 presidential elections, we can see how many candidates use the Spanish language to appeal to the Latino electorate, which constituted 8.4% of the voters in the 2012 elections. All this

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clearly indicates that Spanish is part of the social reality of the US and that it cannot be considered a foreign language, but in fact it has become a second language (for more details on this important distinction see Avelar 2005 and Macías 2014).

Demographic data on the teaching of Spanish in the United States

The main sources of statistical information on the Spanish language and other L2s taught at the university level in the US are surveys that have been carried out since 1958 by the Modern Language Association (MLA) with the support of the Department of Education and, more recently, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Security Educational Program. In the latest survey carried out during the fall of 2013 (Goldberg, Looney and Lusin 2015), 2,616 responses were received from academic institutions, i.e. 98.3% of all those who met the requirements (duly accredited centers, with active L2 programs). Out of these responses, 181 were eliminated for not indicating enrollment of language courses other than English. The information from the remaining 2,435 institutions was divided into one third coming from technical schools ("community/junior/technical colleges," all of them under the category "two-year institutions") and two thirds from colleges and universities ("four-year institutions," in both cases).

In 2013 the total enrollment in L2 courses was 1,562,179, a decrease of 6.7% compared to the total number in the 2009 report and a similar figure to that presented in the 2006 report. Some of the reasons that have been mentioned to explain this slight percentage drop are a downturn in university admissions in general, greater competition between L2s and other areas of study that have emerged in recent years, a reduction of funds for maintaining sufficiently broad curricula and a progressive loss of institutional support for the disciplines traditionally located in the field of humanities (Lacorte 2013). Specific data in the

Spanish language shows similar patterns, with some significant differences. On the one hand, the enrollment in Spanish courses fell for the first time since 1958, from 861,008 students in 2009 to 790,756 in 2013, with a percentage decrease of 8.2%. On the other hand, the number of students enrolled in Spanish language programs still exceeds that of all other L2s combined by almost 20,000, and the presence of Spanish language programs covers the vast majority of institutions that responded to the questionnaire in the country. In particular, 91.4% of institutions reported that they also offer Spanish courses, compared to 66% offering French, which comes in second on the list. For this reason, the authors of the MLA report believe that Spanish is in "a class of its own" (Goldberg, Looney and Lusin 2015, 4), with respect to the rest of L2s, a notion that reflects the consideration of Spanish as the "second national language", as explained in the previous section and illustrated in the following figures:

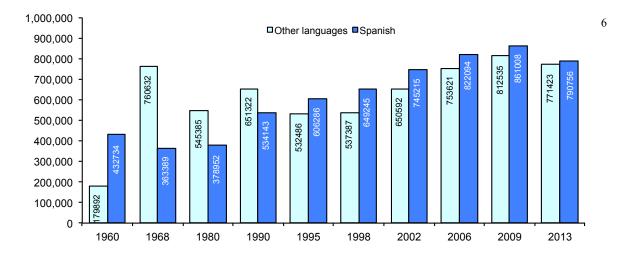


Figure 1. Number of Spanish students compared to those of other languages in US universities.

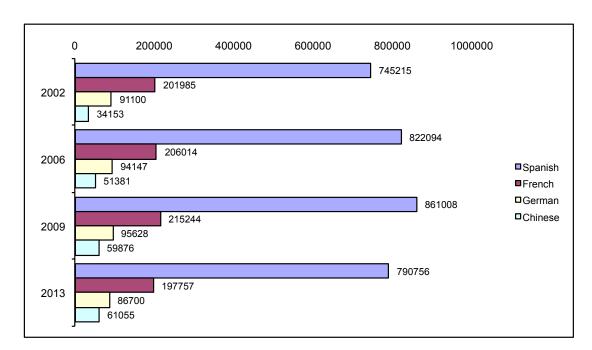


Figure 2. Number of Spanish students compared to German, Chinese, and French students.

As for the distribution of enrollment of Spanish courses based on the type of institution and the program, technical schools confirmed 201,154 enrollments (25.43% of the total), compared to 580,480 (73.40%) in degree programs from colleges and universities and 9,122 (1.15%) in graduate level programs. In fact, the latter group presents the most significant decrease, when considering that the number of graduate students in Spanish reached 11,468 in 2009, which is 20.5% higher than at present:



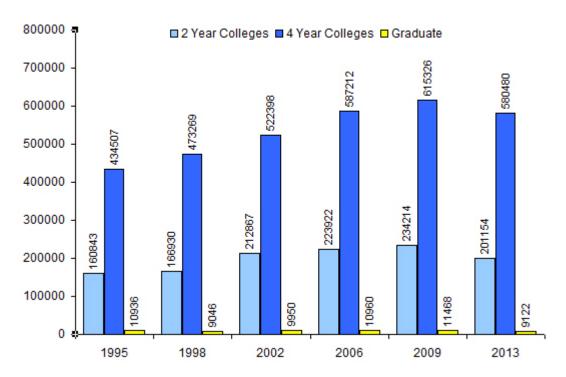


Figure 3. Number of students in two-year colleges, four-year colleges, and universities.

The last piece of information from the MLA report that we would like to emphasize concerns the proportion of enrolment in basic-level courses (first and second year) and advanced-level courses (third and fourth year), since those in the first group are often enrolled as part of university requirements of a linguistic or cultural nature, while there is a possibility that those in the second group can be students that enroll in order to (a) attain a first or second specialty in L2 ("major" or "minor", respectively) and/or (b) to include L2 courses in their resume to support certain professional activities, such as for example Spanish for business purposes, translation and interpretation, health services, etc. (for more information on estimated short-term periods to achieve one or more levels of linguistic proficiency, see e.g., ASTM 2005). The percentage of university students in advanced Spanish courses rose slightly between 2009 and 2013, with a current rate of 16.9% (1 out of every 5 students), which places Spanish among the languages with the highest percentages (below Chinese [21.9%], Portuguese

[22.7%] or Russian [25.5%], and at the same level as German, Japanese, French or Korean).

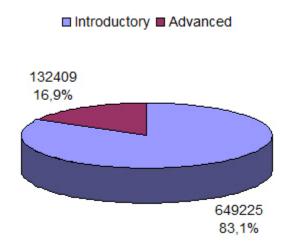


Figure 4. Proportion of enrollments for Introductory and Advanced-level courses.

We decided to include the data analysis on students linked to the Hispanic or Latin community in the US in this final part of the section for two reasons. The first reason, as explained in the previous section, is because this community has maintained a solid presence in various historical, social, cultural and economic levels in the country, and the second is that in the last few years there has been a notable increase of students of Hispanic origin in American universities, as their families and the students themselves increasingly form part of social strata with the willingness or resources to reach this level of education. In 2012 6.8% of students, undergraduates and graduates, that were registered in American universities were of Hispanic descent (US Census Bureau 2014b).

Heritage speakers have an increasingly important visibility in Spanish language programs, either because they feel strongly tied to the Spanish-speaking culture due to emotional or family reasons, even if they do not exhibit linguistic proficiency in Spanish, or because they have been raised in households where Spanish is the predominately used language, and have therefore acquired certain

definitions of the concept according to Polinsky and Kagan 2007) gives rise to what is usually called a "bilingual spectrum" (see e.g., Valdés 1995), that is to say, individuals with very different skill levels in a language, ranging from those who speak and/or write in Spanish without much difficulty ("high-proficiency learners") to those who have had more limited experience with the language ("low-proficiency learners") (Potowski and Lynch 2014). Beaudrie (2012) points out that the majority of Spanish language programs at the university level lack courses designed to accommodate the speakers in the second group, and for that reason they are forced to enroll in general Spanish courses such as L2, which do not take into consideration their specific linguistic and cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, Beaudrie (2012) emphasizes an evident and promising increase of programs and/or courses oriented to heritage Spanish speakers in universities around the country, in particular, 40% offered this course in 2012, in contrast with the 18% pointed out by Ingold, Rivers, Tesser and Ashby in 2002 (for more information on language teaching for heritage speakers see Beaudrie, Ducar and Potowski 2014; Wiley et al. 2014).

linguistic abilities in the language. The continuum of profiles of heritage speakers

that go from one option to another (respectively, the "wide" and "narrow"

The structure of Spanish programs at the university level

Since the arrival of Ponce de Leon on the coasts of Florida in 1513, the teaching of Spanish in the US has evolved significantly (see e.g., Long and Lacorte 2007; Heining-Boynton 2014). In the university context, the Spanish language started to become part of the curriculum in the late XVIII and early XIX centuries in institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania (1766), the College of William and Mary (1779), Harvard (1816), Yale (1826), Columbia (1830) and the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1830. During this initial phase, the Spanish language did not archieve the same popularity as other languages of European origin, like French and German, but as already noted in the previous section, this has

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changed radically in the last decades. In the period from 1960 to 2013 the number of students of Spanish increased by 339%, while it decreased by 13% for French and 41% for German. Spanish also prevails in the number of graduate programs; according to the report "The world studies Spanish" (Department of Education, Culture and Sport 2014), in 2014 there were 961 master's degree programs to study Spanish and 240 doctoral degree programs, well above what is offered for other languages. For this reason, the US is considered one of the research centers on the teaching, acquisition and other applications of Spanish as a foreign, second or heritage language.

Considering the complexity and flexibility of the university system in the US, where technical schools, colleges and universities coexist, the approach to the teaching of L2s in general, and of Spanish in particular, can change significantly from one institution to another. In this section we will first cover the function of foreign languages as requirements for university education; then we will describe different curricular frameworks of special interest for the teaching of Spanish in the US, and finally we will focus on a particularly complex point which shapes various Spanish programs in this country.

Language learning has been a part of the educational requirements at universities from their inception. In 1665 the principal of Harvard proclaimed, "in the first year after admission, for four days of the week, all students shall exercise the study of the Greek and Hebrew Tongues" (Maccoby 1971). While the number of institutions that require the completion of a language prerequisite for graduation has decreased in recent years, the majority of them have kept it. According to the American Council on Education (ACE), in 2011 73% of the universities (in 2001 the percentage was 82%) and 65% of the colleges (71% in 2001) maintained the language requirement. Depending on the institution, this requirement is fulfilled by students that study from one year (two semesters) to three years of Spanish. In some institutions, compliance is determined by

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demonstrating a level of proficiency in the language studied. In these cases, if the students show that they have reached the required level through a placement test administered by the university or through their scores on AP (Advanced Placement) or SAT examinations, which are taken prior to entering a university, they are exempt from taking these courses and are granted fulfillment of the requirement. In other institutions, regardless of the level of mastery of the language, the students have to take language courses for a number of semesters as determined by the institution. According to the previously mentioned ACE study, the most common model of 2011 was that which required students to take one year of language study. In 2011 Spanish and French were the two most popular languages. From those institutions, 92% offered Spanish and 71% offered French.

At the curricular level, in the early years of this century, several proposals have gained greater relevance in university Spanish programs and other L2 programs in the US, primarily the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Proficiency Guidelines* (ACTFL 2012), the *World-Readiness Standards for Foreign Languages* (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015), the "Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages Report" (MLA 2007) and the "Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature" (MLA 2009).

The ACTFL language proficiency guidelines were published for the first time in 1986 in order to adapt the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) descriptors employed by the US Government to academic contexts. In the preface to the latest revision of the guidelines (2012), it is noted that the guidelines represent linguistic skill level descriptions for an individual's functional proficiency in terms of speaking, writing, listening and reading in real-life situations and spontaneous communication contexts. Five general proficiency levels have been identified for each skill: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate and Beginner (each of

the three last levels is divided into three sub-levels: high, medium and low). The main objective of the Proficiency Guidelines is to provide a system of assessment or evaluation in academic and work environments, while also offering options in terms of curriculum and teaching. For example, the guidelines can be used to diagnose the general performance of L2 programs, perform individual assessments of language proficiency at the end of each program or establish teaching objectives based on criteria related to the use of the language, and not just on an abstract knowledge of the linguistic system.

As part of a general movement focused on the implementation of educational standards in the USA, the *World-Readiness Standards for Foreign Languages* constitutes the latest version of the national standards for the learning of languages (*National Standards for Learning Languages*) created in 1996 and revised in 2006. Also known as the 5 C's model (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities), the standards are not designed as specific curricular guidelines, but as dimensions that should be considered in the development of language programs in order to offer students cultural and personal experiences to facilitate the learning process. Until now, the standards have been more common in secondary education, but they have been receiving more attention in L2 programs at the university level thanks to their application in the development of textbooks and other instructional materials, as well as in courses and professional development for L2 teachers in higher education.

Unlike the ACTFL and the national standard guidelines, the reports published by the MLA in 2007 and 2009 are specifically directed at higher education for the purpose of (a) overcoming the crisis situation caused by the attacks of September 11, 2001 with respect to the teaching of foreign languages in universities around the US, and (b) assessing options to strengthen programs in English and other languages and to attract new generations of students to the study of languages, literature and culture. One of the most important aspects covered by these

reports is the prevailing curricular organization of L2 programs at universities in the US, which from the beginning divides language learning from literary analysis. The outcome of the perception of language as a tool, as an instrument for expressing oneself and to access information, has developed a two-tier system in which the teaching of a language has been understood as the training of students so that they can, in addition to meeting a requirement, have access to literature courses, called "content courses" that are offered at higher levels. This division has also influenced the organization of departments, where literature courses are taught by professors (tenured), while language courses are often taught by instructors without a permanent contract (non-tenured). In the case of those departments that have graduate programs, it is also common that masters and/or Ph.D. students have access to teaching assistant positions for language courses under the supervision of other professors. It is also worth mentioning that graduate levels courses have traditionally focused on literature, although in recent decades there has been an increase in cultural studies. The presence of courses related specifically to theoretical or applied linguistics has been almost non-existent.

Among the recommendations provided by the 2007 and 2009 reports for L2 university programs, we would like to highlight the following:

- To strengthen the demand for competency in other L2s within the institution by means of (a) collaboration between administrators and colleagues in other programs and (b) different stimuli to establish reasonable language requirements between undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of academic fields.
- 2. To develop translingual and transcultural abilities of L2 students, in other words, the capacity to operate between languages, to function as informed and qualified interlocutors for native speakers of a L2, to reflect on the world and themselves through other languages and cultures, to see speakers of L2 as members of other social structures not only as speakers of another language and to regard themselves as members of a society different from that of other speakers.

- 3. To incorporate cultural research in courses of all levels, as well as different types of contents in advanced levels in order to place the study of L2 in diverse cultural, historical, geographical and intercultural contexts. For that purpose, it will be particularly useful to teach language using multiple methods and materials from literature, journalism, advertisement, social networks, etc.
- 4. To emphasize the role of literature in the learning process, since both literary texts and the language oral, written, symbolic in which they appear, allow students to be more conscious about the importance of L2s in defining customs, rituals and communication strategies of their speakers.
- 5. To develop a comprehensive curriculum with objectives and guidelines articulated for each level and course in order to help students experience not only a steady progress toward achieving advanced proficiency in the L2, but also to enjoy diverse interrelated courses with the gradual incorporation of linguistic and cultural content.
- 6. To highlight the importance of collaborative work between all members of the teaching staff for the purpose of consolidating the program around the principles at structural coherence, points of connection with other areas of study and collective participation in the holistic design of a program, in other words, from beginner to advanced levels.

Another significant dimension in the current university context relates to the need to align the frameworks and curricular proposals linked to the teaching of L2 with the student learning outcomes or SLOs established by the institution for the student body. In this regard, Norris (2006) indicates the conflict between, the objectives of various language programs with respect to critical cultural knowledge, the development of language skills or attitudes towards other cultures and societies, and the lack of concrete evidence on whether those goals were actually achieved or not. To solve this conflict, the author suggests paying closer attention to the evaluative component in the curricular design of L2 programs, by combining different models not necessarily exclusive to language training. For example, Klee, Melin and Soleson (2015) present a programmatic evaluation model that meets the aforementioned ACTFL language proficiency guidelines and the National Standards of communication and culture, along with

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the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) goals for liberal education, which identified four broad areas of intellectual development for undergraduate students: (1) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world; (2) intellectual and practical skills; (3) personal and social responsibility; and (4) integrative and applied learning^{1,2}.

While in recent years promising steps have been taken with respect to all of these proposals (see e.g., Paesani, Allen and Dupuy 2015), these types of structural changes in L2 programs at university level have never been easy, especially when the majority of instructors responsible for these changes have a broad knowledge of the different literary periods or fields, but rather limited knowledge on issues related to the coordination and evaluation of programs, curriculum development, creation of teaching materials, or supervision of instructors and colleagues (see VanPatten 2015 for further information on this issue from an openly critical view). In a recent study, Hertel and Dings (2014) presented a revealing analysis on faculty views towards the courses that should constitute a specialization program (major) in Spanish. In particular, the researchers gathered answers from a questionnaire regarding curricular issues from more than one hundred teachers in 66 universities in the US with different characteristics. Although a certain level of familiarity with the recommendations in the MLA report (2007) can be seen among the teaching staff, the results indicate a pronounced and established preference towards literature, culture/civilization and language courses, while courses on linguistics, business Spanish and translation are offered more sporadically and do not form part of the basic requirements for the major and they do not receive very much support from the faculty.

¹ See http://bit.ly/1j1AIOW

² See Heining-Boyton and Redmond 2013 to review similar proposals related to the Common & Set Standards Saytoth enset Redmand at Standards view trainpile tup in proposals related to the Common Core Standards, another set of national standards for the pre-university education.

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Prospects for teaching Spanish at the University level in the United States

A report on political goals for L2 learning published by ACTFL (Abbott et al. 2013), notes that only 9% of Americans can speak another language, two-thirds of high school students graduate without having taken any L2 course, and only 8% of university students graduate with some L2 course in their academic record. All of this may indicate that, while the situation of the Spanish language in higher education is quite advantageous compared to other L2s, there is still a long way to go when it comes to transforming the overall mentality and general attitudes of students in the US on the importance of knowing other languages – beyond purely utilitarian views, as has happened traditionally.

Based on a series of in-depth interviews with 16 teaching specialist of L2 in elementary and secondary education, Rhodes (2014) presents 10 strategies that could enhance the quality of Spanish programs, and vitally influence the mindset and attitudes of future university students:

- 1. Pay more attention to the recruitment of good professionals and the development of high quality instruction.
- 2. Identify and establish specific and clear objectives from the first step of the program.
- 3. Articulate a coherent course secuence for the entire program.
- 4. Develop and promote fluid communication between all participants (administrators, teachers, students, parents, community, etc.).
- 5. Carry out promotional activities to endorse and maintain public support.
- 6. Promote teaching positions as L2 supervisor or specialist within the school administration at the local and state level.
- 7. Clarify ideas and misunderstanding about language learning.
- 8. Oversee linguistic development through various systems of continuous evaluation.

- 9. Publicize and assess the successes achieved by various immersion programs.
- 10. Have sufficient economic and human resources to consolidate the short, medium and long-term goals of L2 programs.

As discussed in the previous sections of this report, it is evident that many of these points could be equally important for teaching Spanish at the university level. However, we would like to add other issues that, in our opinion, should be considered carefully when thinking about the immediate or more distant future of the Spanish language in universities in the US. Among them:

- Amount of students enrolled. How will the demographic evolution of Hispanics in the US and their use of Spanish affect their teaching in this country? Up to what point are both aspects linked? Although it seems clear that in the short and medium term Spanish will continue to be the most studied language in higher education due to its undeniable demographic and cultural presence in the country, does Spanish run the risk of experiencing a reduction in enrollment similar to other "international" languages such as Japanese, Russian, French or German?
- Competition with other areas of study. To what extent can Spanish and other L2s justify their institutional position against the pressure of other academic disciplines with special appeal for new generations, such as business, engineering, health, environmental and computer sciences, and everything related to Information and Communication Technology (ICT)?
- Curricular configuration of language departments and programs. What will be the role and weight of the teaching of language, culture and literature? How and to what extent will the teaching of Hispanic speakers with different language proficiency levels be integrated?
- Teaching methodology. Will Spanish language programs adapt to significant changes derived from research on language acquisition, the incorporation of new technologies into everyday life and into education in general, or the socio-cultural processes taking place at the local, national and international levels?
- ICTs. How will constant technological changes and new forms of social communication affect the teaching of Spanish in the US, where its implementation and use is more widespread? What developments will

take place in the field traditionally known as CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and more recently also known as TELL (technology-enhanced language learning) and how will they be applied to the teaching of Spanish in the American context?

As various authors and institutions have recently indicated, it seems clear that a considerable part of the future of Spanish as a language of global communication will be decided in the US. The fate of the Spanish language in this context will determine its future as a language of global reach, and its role in higher education will be an important indicator of its prosperity in this country.

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Enciclopedia del español en los Estados Unidos: http://bit.ly/20mDFhL

La universidad norteamericana: departamentos de español, grandes figuras del hispanismo y asociaciones e instituciones culturales. http://bit.ly/1o2D4Ar

Situación actual de la lengua española en la Universidad de Harvard: http://bit.ly/1RY9Cbi

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El español en Estados Unidos (comunicaciones): http://bit.ly/1SC1cVM

Situación del español en el mundo (Estados Unidos): http://bit.ly/1F3VVhS

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