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Connecting Curriculum to Context: A Story of Two Liberal Arts College Spanish Programs Engaged in a Changing South

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The purpose of this article is to reflect upon the process by which two professors in Spanish programs at small liberal arts colleges in the southeastern United States developed courses with civic engagement components that enabled our students to engage with the local Hispanic community in meaningful ways. From the outset, we focused on what we saw as an opportunity for connecting the curriculum we taught to our specific regional context, which had been shaped by new immigration patterns that brought large populations of Latin Americans to our region during the 1990s. We also explain how our interactions with local community leaders framed our work in such a way that it grew out of a dialogue about shared interests and goals. In addition to offering details about our specific courses, we explain the rationale behind our efforts and elucidate the unexpected impacts that the inclusion of one engagement course had on our respective curricula and other programming at our institutions, such as study abroad.

Keywords: Spanish, Curriculum, Community-based learning, Global education

This reflection tells the story of how our two Spanish programs have adapted curricula to facilitate students' engagement with a changed regional context, in which a surge in Latino residents in the southeastern United States has presented both opportunities and challenges for the small-town communities of which our liberal arts colleges form a part.¹ Wofford College has 1600 students and is located in Spartanburg County, South Carolina; Berry College has 2000 students and is located in Floyd County, Georgia. At the time that we began our efforts to connect our students to their regional context, we were new faculty members; Laura Barbas-Rhoden joined the faculty of Wofford in 2000 and Julee Tate joined the faculty of Berry College in 2003, each of us as tenure-track assistant professors. When we initiated our projects with the local community through the courses we taught, we had little idea of the impact that such work would have on our respective curricula. Instead, we simply focused on what we saw as an opportunity to connect the curriculum we taught to our specific regional context, which had been shaped by new immigration patterns that brought large populations of Latin Americans to the southeastern United States during the 1990s, and to participate in the work of internationalizing our respective campuses, which had begun in the 1980s.² In an effort to have our students engage in global learning close to campus, we grounded our principal innovation, a community-based learning course, in pre-existing "bright spots" in our respective institutions, principally, their service missions and the investments made by our colleagues and institutional leadership in international education in programs abroad. In effect, we saw the community-based learning courses we each designed as an opportunity to integrate engaged, global learning more longitudinally into the Spanish curriculum and to respond to a need brought to us by members of the community with which we wished our campus constituents to interact.

We began this process of course design in two different curricular contexts (one based in a proficiency-oriented curriculum at Wofford and one more traditional, with courses organized by time period at Berry). In spite of the differences in our programs, we saw similar outcomes from the creation of our community-based learning courses, including changes to our curricula, new co-curricular options for students, and positive learning outcomes for students and members of the Latino community with whom they interact. Positive learning outcomes for students include competencies articulated in the VALUE rubrics developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (n.d.c) in the areas of civic engagement (“growing sense of civic identity and commitment,” for example), creative thinking (“creates an entirely new object, solution or idea that is appropriate to the domain”), and global learning (“analyzes the ethical, social, and environmental consequences of global systems and identifies a range of actions informed by one’s sense of personal and civic responsibility”). For learning outcomes for the community, we rely on assay of direct assessment of learning gains by participants, including grade-level reading gains and adult English language proficiency.

Curricular and co-curricular changes have also been positive, in terms of aligning our major program goals with outcomes articulated in national and international conversations about language education and global learning.³ In the case of the more proficiency-oriented curriculum, changes were incremental and consisted primarily of additions to program offerings, while in the case of the more traditional curriculum, changes took the form of a major overhaul of the catalog, the result being a more proficiency-oriented curriculum that includes additional opportunities for community engagement. The magnitude of these impacts on two very different curricula suggests that this kind of engagement can be done successfully and with a range of curricular outcomes at a variety of institutions.

In the following pages we will share the process by which we began our work of engagement with local communities and how the development of major curricula were informed by this kind of engagement. Over a decade of work at our respective colleges, we have, with our colleagues, methodically integrated the practice of civic engagement with a global and cross-cultural orientation into our major programs, and institutional assessment data about our programs demonstrate that there is value to be gained by connecting students’ curricular work to their broader context beyond the classroom, both locally and internationally. Our goal has been and continues to be offering students educational experiences that connect our curriculum to “context,” that is, the world in which graduates will operate as professionals and citizens shortly after taking our courses.

Our Regional Context and Program Engagement with It

Connecting curriculum to context in Spanish programs in the South has entailed a two-fold approach: helping students understand their own roles and identities within the dynamic multicultural realities of the region, with local community-based and service learning playing an important role, and providing students with the means to deepen their understanding of how they as individuals, and the communities of which they are a part, are globally situated, with study abroad as a key component. Each learning opportunity in these two spheres—the local and the global—reinforces the other. For example, prior to the demographic shifts of the last two decades, direct cross-cultural contact with Spanish-speakers was most readily accessible through study-abroad experiences; now, our students have had the opportunity to engage on a regular basis with Spanish speakers who live in

their college towns and to do so while sharing a common purpose (most broadly, improved education) with those speakers. Having a cross-cultural opportunity with a reflective classroom component prior to experience abroad has created a scaffolding effect that makes the experience in another country a much richer one, as well as an easier transition, for both English-speaking students and the growing number of heritage speakers of Spanish in our programs, and in this way, our curricular innovation has amplified institutional investments in internationalizing student experiences. The local engagement experience, early in the pathway to the major, also helps students consider career options in areas in which Spanish language proficiency and cross-cultural competencies are highly desired by employers. Significantly, this experience is situated at a time when students can readily build into their course of undergraduate study other activities for career readiness (for example, internships or specific coursework) well before graduation.

In our case, we understand the “context” with which our students engage to be defined as (1) an institutional mission that emphasizes liberal education,⁴ (2) a push for more internationalized curricula in higher education in the United States, including in our own colleges, and (3) a new, more multicultural and multilingual South, in which the states of Georgia and South Carolina have had among the ten highest rates of Hispanic population growth in the United States (Lopez, 2013). Our respective counties saw a 160% (Floyd, GA) and 366% (Spartanburg, SC) growth in the Hispanic population from 1990-2000, the decade prior to our arrival at our colleges, and a 162% (Floyd, GA) and 135% (Spartanburg, SC) from 2000-2010, the decade during which we developed our curricula. Because both of our institutions have similar educational missions and are located in small cities in this rapidly changing context, we have benefitted from opportunities to collaborate with one another through conversation, the exchange of assessment instruments and course materials, the use of data from the more established program at Wofford College to inform the work of Berry College’s Spanish program, and idea generation sessions with each other and colleagues about next steps for our programs. When we began to think about integrating civic engagement into the courses we taught, we looked at our major/minor curricula and the communities in which we lived, and assessed possible ways we might connect the two to maximize benefit for local community members, our students, and our colleagues. It is important to note that we did not impose our “help,” or our students’ help, on a community or group, rather we began by listening to leaders of the local Hispanic community and to school personnel in order to form partnerships in which we were connecting our students to people and organizations that expressed an interest in building a relationship with our respective programs. We did the same on our campuses, looking for ways to complement existing programs and open new spaces of learning for students.

In the case of the community collaborations involving Spanish students at Berry College, Julee was approached by the pastor of a local Hispanic church that had been holding English classes for over a decade, but which was about to lose their space. He inquired about the possibility of Berry hosting the program, and a collaborative relationship was born. Berry students had already been serving the students at the church-site, but the move to their home campus meant a new level of involvement. The Berry ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) Program, now in its sixth year, registers each semester more than double the number of local students than were hosted at the church site, and the program has evolved into a student-run and operated enterprise. In the case of Wofford College, Laura had been exploring with principals the possibility of a primary school

reading outreach program, oriented toward multicultural topics shared by language majors, when she received a phone call from a guidance counselor in a majority Latino elementary school asking if Spanish majors might help Spanish-speaking children adjust to school and teachers serve the new student population. From that initial phone call, a partnership began that now includes work with children during school hours and with parents and children after-school in a variety of programs in that community school.

Connecting Community Engagement to Curriculum

In order to formalize the place of civic engagement in Berry's curriculum, in 2009 a gateway course⁵ was added to the Berry catalog. The course was modeled after a similar Spanish course that was reconfigured around community-based learning at Wofford in 2002. This was the first major step in our collaboration. Interestingly, this one innovation had the effect of prompting other conversations amongst faculty in the Berry program and eventually yielded an overhauled catalog that went into effect in 2012. The net effect of the changes and additions were to move Berry's Spanish program from a Spanish curriculum based on literary content and mostly populated by survey courses, to a roster of options that focuses more on helping students move to proficiency and global and cross-cultural competency and can be taught with a wide range of content, thereby providing flexibility for faculty to use texts of their choosing in pursuing learning goals. (Curricula for both Berry and Wofford Spanish majors may be found at the end of the article.)

While for Berry College the incorporation of community-based learning in a gateway course was the impetus for major revisions to the catalog, for Wofford College, the makeover of a pre-existing Advanced Spanish course permitted the more intentional integration of prior high impact practices (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d.b) in the major (such as study abroad) and the addition of new ones (such as co-curricular leadership and research opportunities). Differences in curricular histories and changes are not the only distinguishing characteristics of our programs. Other distinctions should be pointed out as well and may be of interest to readers from different institutions who may have more in common with one of us than the other.

To mention a few of the more significant differences between our programs, Wofford requires all students to study a modern language, taken during their first semester of college. In this way, Wofford distinguishes itself from a national trend in which the percentage of all U.S. degree-granting institutions that require a foreign language had dropped from 53% to 37% from 2001 to 2011 (American Council on Education, 2012). In fact, Spanish is the 4th largest major at Wofford (and largest major in the humanities) in terms of numbers of graduates. By contrast, Berry requires only B.A. students to study a modern language, and they may take the course at any time, though efforts are made to place students with an interest in a B.A. major in a language course in their first semester. Additionally, Wofford requires all modern language majors to spend a semester abroad; Berry strongly encourages, but does not require, study abroad for majors. A third important distinction, and one of particular relevance for this reflection, is that the Wofford Spanish program, in which the gateway course into the major has been in existence as a community-based learning course since 2002, includes more numerous, integrated opportunities for community engagement than does the program at Berry College, where the gateway course has been in existence for six years. Again, we share these differences to emphasize that, regardless of program size and requirements, one well-designed course with a community

engagement component can open doors to the creation of others over time, each of which can be articulated thoughtfully as an elective, requirement, or co-curricular option.

Specifics of Our Programs

At Wofford, the gateway course enrolls sophomores in their third semester of language study (2/3 of enrollees) and advanced first-year students (1/3 of enrollees) and has grown from one section (16 students) in 2002 to four sections (78 students) in 2013. The course requires that students spend 10 hours (one hour per week for most of the term) in the local Latino community; student community placements are in Arcadia Elementary School, where there is 65% Hispanic enrollment (mostly in households where Spanish is spoken at home) and after-school programs serving Arcadia families. Under the auspices of the course, students now invest a collective 500 service hours in the local community each fall term. Prior to that service, during the first month of the term and for their first four community hours, students participate in preparation activities (workshops, community-led walking tours) facilitated in conjunction with the Wofford Center for Global and Community Engagement and community partners, while they wait for background checks required by schools to clear. That pre-service work accounts for another 250 hours of education in community-based learning in our student body. In the service component of the gateway course, Wofford students serve as classroom helpers, after-school homework assistants, reading buddies, and after-school adult ESOL teachers and assistants; self-evaluate their contribution to their partner program and report on it weekly in Spanish; read articles relevant to issues in the local community in English and Spanish; and periodically throughout the term, produce reflective writing assignments in Spanish about their own identities, growth, and perceptions of community life.

The Berry gateway course includes a one credit hour community-based learning component, with the adult ESOL Program led by Berry students the most common site choice made by students in the course. Students volunteer, on the average, 18 hours with the local community during the semester, which means that during both the fall and spring semesters, students in the course volunteer between 400 and 500 hours in the community, depending upon enrollment. Students also participate in a targeted orientation session prior to beginning their work with the ESOL program, which offers local community members the opportunity to study English two evenings each week during the fall and spring semesters. It also offers Berry students the opportunity to engage with the local Hispanic community in a meaningful way (in part facilitated by targeted writing reflections and in-class discussion in Spanish) and to hone professional skills including public speaking, teaching, staff coordination, and leadership.

Our gateway courses have been important in building the dispositions and skills students will need to participate in later community and globally oriented engagement activities, as well as their future civic and professional lives, in a space in which they are advancing work addressing important community challenges in the area of education. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching frames engagement as a two-way street that by definition is advantageous to all stakeholders: “Engagement describes the collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.). A significant aspect of this benefit for academic institutions is that it provides a laboratory for teaching students

what it means to be a good and responsible citizen.

From the Gateway Course to Milestones and Beyond

Our major programs build on the learning gains achieved in the gateway course, which is preceded for many students by solid instruction in introductory and intermediate-level language work, either in high school or in college. From the cornerstone of the gateway course, students advance to additional milestone and capstone-level opportunities for creative thinking, global learning, and civic engagement, in which students may individualize their learning in the major via other high impact practices, from elective courses to internships, undergraduate research, international programs, and co-curricular leadership work, as well as in more traditional coursework.

At Wofford, for example, the gateway course has led to the creation of numerous student-led social entrepreneurship startups that tackle issues discussed in class, as well as a course on leadership and social change. Launched in 2013, *Leadership and Social Change in the Hispanic World* is an integrative, applied, writing intensive, projects-based, elective course, which in its inaugural year, culminated in a class-produced short film and well-attended public screening. A collective production by the twelve students in the course, the film emphasized, in student and community voices, the transformational effect of community-based learning and featured initiatives in two local neighborhoods. Social entrepreneurship initiatives are supported by the Center for Global and Community Learning and The Space, Wofford's innovative career services center. Standing student-led, co-curricular programs initiated by alumni of the gateway course offer students campus-wide the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural collaborations and include "La U y tú," which brings Arcadia first-graders to Wofford once a month for fun and educational activities (to encourage college aspirations); the Pen Pal Project, which pairs each Arcadia 5th grader with a Wofford pen pal for once weekly letter exchanges (to promote college aspirations and grade-level writing); Get Moving!, an after-school fitness and mentoring program (to tackle the obesity challenge in our county and promote healthy self-esteem); and Let's Read, a parent-child, English literacy initiative that works one-on-one with parents and their 4K and 5K children. All programs have been sustained to date, funded by different entities on and off campus which student leaders have themselves identified. Early assessment data indicates that Wofford student startups begun during the gateway course demonstrate extraordinary learning outcomes, often at the capstone level (even for sophomore student leaders).

Similarly, since Berry is the sponsor and host for the ESOL Program, Berry students benefit from the numerous leadership opportunities it provides. The program employs a cascading leadership model in which students take ownership in coordination, curriculum development, and operational work, including a succession plan for the director position. The student staff relies on a faculty member only for consultation and the mentoring of the student director. It is the student director who is in charge of coordinating approximately 30 volunteers each semester and is responsible for ensuring the smooth running of a program that enrolls 80-100 local community students. While almost all students who participate in the program report significant gains in surveys administered each term, the student who rises to become director of the program leaves it with an enviable resume. One past director went on to serve as a Fulbright Teaching Assistant in Spain, while another received a Dean's Fellowship to study Hispanic Linguistics at the University of California at Davis.

In addition to local opportunities for students to build cross-cultural and civic competencies, both Berry and Wofford programs include options for short-term and long-term study abroad in multiple locations in the Spanish-speaking world. Study abroad initiatives pre-date the community-based learning gateway courses. In fact, Wofford had been encouraging students to study abroad since the 1970s and began partnerships with consortium partners in the late 1970s. Berry began taking groups of students to Spain in 1975 and later joined with consortium partners like ISA and SSA to offer students a broader range of options for study. The gateway courses we developed intentionally built upon the “bright spot” of our colleagues’ and institutions’ commitment to international learning and sought to bring the benefits of high impact practices, like study abroad, to students earlier in the major. One outcome has been that students connect global learning to regional contexts, both before and after they undertake study in an international program, and many continue to engage in service locally and while abroad. Since Berry and Wofford both offer significant and well-established service options, students can readily engage with communities internationally. One example of such an offering that is supported by Berry faculty is a seven-week summer program in Costa Rica in which Berry students live with local host families and teach English in underserved public elementary schools. At Wofford, which partners with various study abroad consortia, language majors may choose to study in any one of two dozen sites, located throughout Latin America and Spain, and an increasing number seek program options with research, internship, or service-learning components. International program support at Wofford is robust; in fact, Wofford is the only South Carolina College to be recognized in the 2013 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange for high levels of student participation in study abroad programs (Institute of International Education, 2013). Even better from the perspective of second language acquisition, an important educational outcome defined as critical in work like the Lumina Foundation Degree Qualification Profile (2011), half of the Wofford students who participate in a semester-long international program do so in a modern language program, exceeding the national average by nearly 20%.

Conclusions: What’s Next for Our Projects?

Since regional demographics, economic profiles, and cultural contexts are dynamic, we have found that connecting curriculum to context is a task in which continual evolution and improvement are vital. We actively and regularly plan, with each other and our colleagues, ways to improve, enhance, and adapt our programs to our changing context. Because our work requires active listening to many collaborators, we have an opportunity to understand the opportunities and challenges ahead for our students, programs, and institutions, and to be a part of teams working to shape positive change. In such a way, our effort to connect the curriculum to both local and global contexts equips us and our colleagues to be leaders for our institutions, as our colleges define their mission in a South changed by high rates of Latino immigration and a global reality shaped by connectedness and exchange. Our future work will be determined as much by the changing community around us, as by ourselves, just as our initial work was. In the meantime, we know the real, tangible benefits for our institutions and our communities position each of our stakeholders more positively for collective action, for civic and global learning, and for stewardship of the communities in which we live and learn.

Notes

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²For more on trends to internationalize curricula in the United States, please see the American Council on Education report, "Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses," 2012 edition (American Council on Education, 2012). Our institutions have followed broad trends as outlined in the report. For example, Wofford initiated partnerships with third party providers for study abroad in the late 1970s; Berry, in the 1980s.

³The 2007 Modern Language Association report on "Foreign Languages and Higher Education," for example, advocates for curricular reform that "situates language study in cultural, historical, geographic, and cross-cultural frames within the context of humanistic learning." (Modern Languages Association, n.d.)

⁴We find the AAC&U statement on liberal education offers the best definition of what we mean by "liberal learning" in this reflection: "Liberal education requires that we understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities" (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d.a).

⁵For those unfamiliar with modern languages curricula, by "gateway" course, we mean the last course in the standard language sequence, taken before students begin advanced work in the major with a focus on cultural products, traditionally literary texts. The language sequence at most institutions ranges from beginning (101) to advanced (sophomore or junior level) language courses, in which the primary focus is the acquisition of four proficiency competencies (speaking, reading, writing, and listening) in the target language, as well as "cultural competency."

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Wofford Spanish Major (in place since 1990)

24 hours, with 18 hours at the 300-level or above

Required courses

- Intermediate Spanish I and II (200-level): focuses on the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), with a special emphasis on auditory comprehension of digital texts (customized curriculum of news clips and telenovelas)
- Advanced Spanish (300-level): focuses on the four skills; revised in 2002 and re-named Advanced Spanish with Community-Based Learning to integrate community-based learning into course and emphasize cross-cultural and civic engagement competencies
- Modern Writers of the Hispanic World (300-level): emphasis upon reading competency in primary, creative texts; oral and written communication
- Cultures of the Hispanic World (Spain or Latin America) (300-level): focus on acquisition of skills and foundational knowledge for students to engage in lifelong learning about cultures of the Hispanic world
- Advanced Literature/Film course (400-level): emphasis upon reading competency in primary, creative texts; oral and written communication
- Advanced Literature/Film or Skills (interpretation, practical and creative writing) course (400-level): emphasis upon reading competency in primary, creative texts; oral and written communication; and/or global learning competencies
- Semester abroad in Spanish-speaking country, with numerous programs offering service learning opportunities, as well as research projects and internships

Electives

May be chosen from among courses offered at 300 and 400-level, on subjects including Oral Texts in Spanish, Leadership and Social Change in the Hispanic World, and more traditional literary topics

Berry Spanish Major (in place since 2012)

28 hours

Spanish Major Core (16 hours):

- Spanish in Context (Gateway Course) (SPA 290): focuses on the four skills, as well as cross-cultural and civic engagement competencies

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- Oral and Written Expression (300-level): focuses on the four skills, with special emphasis on listening comprehension and written and oral production
- Advanced Grammar and Composition (300-level): emphasis upon writing skills and grammatical review and accuracy
- Introduction to Hispanic Literature and Literary Analysis (Spain or Latin America) (300-level): emphasis upon reading competency and critical analysis of assigned texts through oral and written communication
- Histories and Cultures of the Hispanic World (Spain or Latin America) (300-level): emphasis on multi- and intercultural competency with continued application of the four skills

Spanish Major Electives (9 hours):

To be chosen from the following areas: Linguistic Studies, Literary Studies and Cultural Studies. (At least one of the 400-level electives must be a literature course.)

Study Abroad or Senior Project (3 hours)

Berry Spanish Major (2001 Catalogue; replaced with above curriculum in 2012)

36 hours, with 24 at the 300-level or above

- Introduction to Spanish 1 (100 level)
- Introduction to Spanish 2 (100 level)
- Intermediate Spanish (200-level)
- Advanced Conversation or Hispanic Culture (300-level)
- Advanced Composition or Advanced Grammar (300-level)
- Introduction to Literary Analysis (300-level)
- Survey of Peninsular Literature or Survey of Spanish American Literature (300-level)
- 3 400-level seminars - Options primarily limited to literary survey courses
- Study Abroad or Senior Project

About the Authors

•**Laura Barbas-Rhoden** is Associate Professor of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Wofford College and former coordinator of the Spanish major. She is the author of two books and more than 18 articles and chapters on Latin American literature and culture, as well as on teaching and learning. The civic engagement course she designed for Spanish majors at Wofford College won the 2003-2004 South Carolina Commission on Higher Education award for excellence in service learning and is the cornerstone for majors' engagement in experiential and service learning throughout the major curriculum.

•**Julee Tate** is Associate Professor of Spanish at Berry College in Rome, Georgia. She joined the Department of Foreign Languages in 2003 after completing graduate studies in Spanish and Portuguese at Tulane University. She has published numerous articles on 20th and 21st century Latin American literature and culture. She is also interested in community-based learning and served as faculty director of the Berry College ESOL Program from 2008 to 2013. Currently she is serving as the Faculty Associate of Berry College's Bonner Center for Community Engagement.