

Redressing the Loss of the Language Assistant after the Financial Sustainability Review
Final Report: Pedagogical Inquiry Grant/Departmental Inquiry-Hispanic Studies
Aarón Aguilar-Ramírez and Janis Be
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Preliminary Remarks

With this grant the Hispanic Studies Department sought to redress the permanent loss of the Language Assistant following the FSR. This loss negatively impacts not only our curricular offerings at all levels of instruction but also extra-curricular activities. Traditionally, in all language departments, the LAs worked alongside RAs in the interest house as well as conducted discussion sessions in skills-level courses, with the goal of assisting students with oral expression. Additionally, and uniquely to Hispanic Studies, the LAs further supported students in upper-level courses (particularly 320 and 490/thesis) with both oral and advanced written language expression. This was done in three primary ways: through daily work in the classroom as a teaching assistant, by preparing and leading conversation groups outside of class, and by providing intensive one-on-one consultations. The LA also integrated targeted elements of grammar review into discussion sessions at the intermediate and advanced language levels, in close coordination with the Hispanic Studies faculty.

The significant role undertaken by the LA across the Hispanic Studies curriculum was specifically noted in an external review report from fall 2018 which recommended that the Department hire an *additional* LA. In their words, “[Students] highly value the role of the Spanish Language Assistant. . . the department will benefit greatly from having two Spanish Language Assistants who can provide additional support for faculty and students.” The results of conducting the pedagogical inquiry this summer likewise indicate that the LAs have long been a vital and essential component of the Hispanic Studies curriculum and have had a lasting impact upon Whitman students; they cannot satisfactorily be replaced by hiring undergraduate students. Nevertheless, we found that hiring a cohort of students in select roles would redress *some*, though not all, of the losses of the language assistant while providing new opportunities for students in Hispanic Studies to engage in meaningful pedagogical and cultural work on campus.

Overview of the Grant Work

As stated in our original application, our primary focus was to seek possible solutions following the loss of the Language Assistant. That is, we explored how to best attempt to replace the LAs’ expertise in assisting Hispanic Studies Professors with teaching oral communication, grammatical accuracy, cultural competency, and the production of advanced academic writing at the level of thesis (490). The institution’s recommendation--as stated in the President's Cabinet's recommendations from the Financial Sustainability Report--has been to allow “language

departments to hire current students for language assistant function if they choose to do so,” despite a lack of training, expertise, and qualifications (the Language Assistants in Hispanic Studies commonly held Master’s degrees in philology, translation, or a related field). Our aim with this grant was to determine if/how hiring undergraduates might be done successfully. Grant work consisted of fully understanding the role and impact of the LAs in the past, assessing current curricular needs, researching peer institutions, outlining possible best practices, and drafting proposed procedural policies for the Department.

To this end, we wrote and disseminated surveys to current students and alumni (dating from a 2008 graduate to the 2021 cohort) with respect to the role of the LA in their language learning across all levels. At the same time, we surveyed departmental faculty in order to project curricular mapping and assess which skills are most emphasized at which levels and in what ways. Simultaneous to this internal research, we studied how our peer institutions address oral and cultural teaching and learning beyond the classroom. We then generated a set of guidelines or departmental policies in order to develop and/or codify a set of principles and best practices for our department. These guidelines take into account the ways that the role of the LA will need to be adapted when hiring current students rather than a highly specialized LA, given the vastly differing degrees of education, levels of training, and cultural competencies LAs bring to campus and community life. Newly devised departmental guidelines and policies address such critical areas as the hiring process, and the criteria for hiring students.

Throughout the summer we worked alongside a student committee composed of five Hispanic Studies majors, whose experience with LAs collectively covered the full range of the LA duties. These are also students the Department will likely call upon to fill various aspects of the LA role. Tasks were carefully divided among the students such that workload and responsibilities were distributed evenly. Each took turns in leadership roles of leading discussions, compiling responses, and drafting documents.

After meeting with us on zoom to fully understand the nature and scope of the grant work as well as the aims of the project, students were asked to reflect, individually and collectively, upon their own personal experiences. They then assisted us in researching and comparing best practices at other institutions and further helped us in creating and administering distinct surveys for current students, alumni, and previous LAs. After all of this data was collected and analyzed, the student collaborators individually and collectively offered their assessments, considered possible solutions, and enumerated potential concerns regarding replacement of the LA with student hires. At the conclusion of the summer grant work, the student committee drafted a final report summarizing their observations, recommendations, and concerns.

Throughout the summer, at each stage of this work, the professors met with the students (via zoom) to re-clarify the process and goals, meeting after each stage to assess the collected data

and debrief. We were conscientious of matters of equity and privacy but also wanted to elicit the students' candid responses. To this end, we arranged it so that students met together privately before meeting with professors. All written reflections and documents were submitted to the professors in a collective and anonymous format.

Working on this grant this summer has allowed our student collaborators to more fully appreciate how important the LA role has been, to better understand how students have benefited from working with a LA in the past, and to proactively imagine and consider how they can best perform this role when called upon to carry out various aspects of the LA position themselves. In addition to providing the faculty with valuable data and concrete recommendations that we in turn incorporated into our final recommendations, the student committee also shed light on the student perspective regarding the challenges student hires will face when taking on specific duties held by the LAs.

Outcomes and Conclusions

We found that the LA program made Whitman distinctive among our peer institutions and provided greater value for the college than its rather nominal cost. A member of the student committee, responding to the results of comparative data on Whitman's peer institutions, said it best in a written reflection: "I do not believe that any of the institutions that we have researched demonstrated a model that was comparable to Whitman's LA in terms of cultural and linguistic competence, teaching ability, time and dedication." Thus, we found that through the loss of the LA program Whitman lost a standout, unique feature of its language and cultural offerings.

After conducting this work, we have concluded that it will be necessary to engage in curricular changes at all levels across the department with the loss of the LA, especially with respect to oral communication practice both inside and outside of the classroom. To this end, we have outlined possible solutions to an array of logistical, curricular and pedagogical complications, and generated a set of principles and proposed guidelines for the Hispanic Studies Department that will facilitate the change to hiring students. As enumerated below, we propose a series of guidelines and policies on how to best create, fill, and distribute the various responsibilities formerly held by the LA each semester (Cultural Coordinator, as well as curricular support at the levels of 205/6, 305/6, and 320) in addition to the process of hiring an alum to serve as a Thesis Assistant with 490/capstone. Specifically, we:

- Developed general qualifications and criteria for the selecting and hiring students for each role. With respect to conversation leaders for the skills-level language courses:
 - Preference for prior experience with the specific courses for which students are hired (205/206, 305/306, 320)
 - Preference for advanced Hispanic Studies majors

- Preference for students who have completed 340-level courses and at least one 400-level course
- Preference for juniors and seniors.
- Determined best practices and expedient hiring processes for these roles:
 - Invitation by individual professors for each course per semester
 - Limit students to one academic support role per semester
 - Establish mechanisms for coordination between members of the Department for best placing student hires and to avoid hiring individual students for multiple roles.
- Determined how to coordinate these hires alongside the hiring of Writing Fellows:
 - Students hired through the LA budget line are assigned to 205/206, 305/306 and 320 to assist with oral communication skills and to lead out-of-class conversation groups.
 - A recent alum (rather than a current student) to be hired as a Thesis Assistant through the LA budget line to provide writing support for seniors at all stages of the thesis process in 490.
 - Writing fellows to be hired only at the 306, 320, and 340 levels to assist with the mechanics of writing and critical / textual analysis. Thus this role remains entirely distinct in that it address academic and scholarly writing rather than oral communication skills.
- Devised alternative or contingency plans in the event there are not enough available student hires in any given semester:
 - Hire students for multiple roles, but only if absolutely necessary
 - Hire non-majors with coursework experience at the 300- and 400-levels in Hispanic Studies
 - If possible, hire international native speakers or domestic heritage speakers not affiliated with Hispanic Studies to serve as a cultural liaison and/or for narrow roles in academic support
 - Request to hire alumni in lieu of current students for academic roles
- Assessed potential changes to our courses given reduced qualifications of student vs. LA:
 - Grammar: by hiring current students, those hired for this position will no longer be able to instruct or assess peers on grammar and advanced language structures. Given the need for extensive training on basic approaches to teaching oral communication and other pedagogical principles, we determined that it would be impractical to also train current students in the teaching of grammar. Instead, student hires will focus on *informal* practice of oral competencies and

conversational skills in Spanish with no assessment and limited grammatical feedback. We determined that individual instructors should be individually responsible for determining the best implementation of student hires within these parameters, as well as providing adequate training according to the instructor's preferred teaching and pedagogical approaches.

- Classroom roles: When hiring current students, it will no longer be possible to have a teaching assistant present every day in the classroom at the 306 and 320 levels as was done before with the LA. Therefore, this role will be entirely eliminated. Other in-class work will be reduced (e.g. by eliminating assistance with grammar tasks) and limited to conversational and discussion-based tasks. However, student hires might be invited into the classroom on occasion for specific instructional activities.
 - Culture: Student hires within our department are not in a position to serve as a cultural ambassador or liaison for their peers, although hiring an international student/heritage speaker not otherwise affiliated with the Department could potentially allow for additional opportunities for cultural teaching and learning. That said, in consultation with Hispanic Studies faculty and the La Casa Hispana Resident Assistant, a student hire could serve as program coordinator to organize and host Mesa Hispana and cultural events at La Casa Hispana using the budget normally given to La Casa Hispana for this purpose.
- Submitted a request to the Dean to codify the annual hiring of a recent alumnus to assist students with the writing component of 490/thesis as no enrolled undergrad has the qualifications to assist the most advanced students in the major.
 - Drafted a job description for the 490 position for this proposed alumni hire.

Areas of Concern and Limitations

Ideally, if hiring among the student body, replacement hires for the LA would be advanced majors that have successfully taken the courses in which they serve. However, we have relatively few upper-level students, and we already employ writing fellows at the 306, 320 and 340 levels from this limited pool. Above, we have identified a contingency plan for hiring students should there not be enough eligible students for a given position. Nevertheless, the question of how to hire students at the most appropriate levels and find enough resources to fill the needs of all Hispanic Studies faculty in an equitable manner remains a challenge.

Whitman students on the student committee expressed hesitation with respect to their own abilities and qualifications should they be called upon to take on the duties and responsibilities of the Language Assistant. In their final report they noted, in addition to the absolute inability of undergraduates to assist with 490/thesis, there are other specific areas that the LA filled uniquely and irreplaceably. In their words, "It is clear that there are immense losses in the recreation of a

student position and there are many concerns for the following: loss of native speaking ability/sufficient linguistic ability, absence of cultural knowledge, lack of commitment to the position, and other limitations.” Our recommendation is to hire a recent alum to assist in thesis work and to serve as a peer mentor for seniors; this hire has previously been approved and funded on an ad hoc basis for the Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 semesters.

An irreparable loss is the LAs unique standing in the community. The student committee noted the unique mentoring roles that LAs commonly fulfilled for students, as well as their role as intermediary between students and faculty. Students referred to the LA as a friend, as a mentor on their personal struggles, as a mediator, confidante, and cultural ambassador. Traditionally older than most students, LAs were role models for personal and academic achievement, yet they shared a living space with students. The student committee noted that this loss was especially difficult, and would have negative ramifications on the culture of La Casa Hispana and the broader cultural life on campus. We see no viable way of redressing this loss.

While administration has indicated that faculty should hire undergraduate students to replace the LAs, no information as to how that process would work or where the money comes from has been forthcoming. Furthermore, there is currently no mechanism in place to guarantee student hires from semester to semester or year to year. This means that the continuity of this work is in jeopardy, unless a specific budget line and codified process for hiring current students and an alum for 490 are created as recommended.

Importantly, as we conducted this grant work, we were unexpectedly confronted with the additional loss of Language Learning Center and the need to locate a new location. This has been distressing and demoralizing to say the least. The loss of a permanent home and physical space for carrying out this work further jeopardizes the stability and integrity of the academic programs. Years were spent shaping the LLC into the thriving hub that it became for the language departments. We were given less than a month to identify a new space for fall semester (July 30th, deadline) and were asked to participate in that process as unpaid summer labor.

Finally, the student committee strongly stressed the need for training and additional support. It is unclear if the institution will provide the necessary support and resources for student hires. To this end, we strongly recommend the creation of a permanent lending library of source materials that hired students can utilize. Specifically, texts that explain concepts of advanced grammar would be useful. Also beneficial would be the purchase of pedagogical materials relating to how to effectively lead conversation groups in another language, as well as design and create activities for practicing oral proficiency. As far as job training, it remains unclear who on campus would be qualified to do this work, and what budget would cover those expenses.

Specific Recommendations

While this work has reinforced the essential and unique role the LA held at Whitman and the invaluable academic, cultural and interpersonal support the LA brought to campus, the hiring of students and alumni does afford the Department and the College with tangible benefits: increased academic and pedagogical professional experience for student hires; a strengthened sense of community and interpersonal connections among all Hispanic Studies students; increased employment opportunities in the relevant areas of study for advanced students. Hiring an alum in 490 additionally provides a peer mentor for seniors, a role not possible for a LA. This proved to be especially beneficial for the 2021 graduates who were writing a thesis from the isolation of home during the global pandemic.

The Hispanic Studies Department will need to hire the following alum/student positions at these estimated costs. These totals assume students are hired at \$15/hour, the minimum wage in Washington State. We recommend a permanent annual budget specific to the Hispanic Studies Department to cover these positions. Language courses will employ students for 5 hours per week to hold small group conversation sessions outside of the normal classroom meetings. We strongly recommend hiring a recent alum to assist students with 490 / senior thesis, as explained above. Given the unique nature of thesis work, we suggest that this be a flat stipend paid out over the fall semester to the Thesis Assistant rather than an hourly wage. Note: the responsibilities of all of these positions are completely separate and distinct from the duties performed by Writing Fellows who are hired primarily at the 34x level.

A. 490 Alum Hire- Fall	Flat Stipend	5-7 Students (\$3000) or 8+ (\$4000)
B. 320 Student Hire-Fall	Hourly Wage	60 hours (\$900)
C. 2 305 Student Hires -Spring	Hourly Wage	120 hours (\$1800)
D. 306 Student Hire- Fall	Hourly Wage	60 hours (\$900)
E. 2 205 Student Hires-Spring	Hourly Wage	120 hours (\$1800)
F. 206 Student Hire- Fall	Hourly Wage	60 hours (\$900)
G. Cultural Hire - FA/SP	Hourly Wage	60 hours/ year (\$900)

Given the need for substantive training that students would require in order to fulfill the former academic roles of the LA, both the students and faculty involved should be paid for those additional training hours:

H. Training Hours	Hourly Wage	up to 40 hours / year (\$600)
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As described above, we recommend the creation of a permanent lending library. This would primarily be a one time, start-up expense, with occasional additions being made as the need arises.

I. Lending Library Materials

one time cost

\$1500

This library will consist of 10 copies of all books purchased. This will allow each hired student to keep a copy for the semester they are working, plus allow for a copy or two to remain available in whatever space languages are provided. These additional copies will be available on site to students and to student hires, and can be used to cover the inevitable loss of copies over time.

We recommend an annual budget of \$11,800 for the 2021-2021 academic year. Please note that these are estimates based on prior work performed by LAs; after the first year of employing students these figures will need to be revisited and potentially adjusted. We request the funds for the lending library for the 2021-2022 academic year, on top of the annual budget.

Sharing of Grant Work

The Pedagogical Inquiry Grants this summer were offered only to departments specifically impacted by the FSR to address their immediate and specific needs. As such, our work is very specific to the needs and curricular offerings of the Hispanic Studies Department; we do not feel that the outcomes of this work would be of use to the broader campus community and therefore see no benefit to offering a CTL presentation. That said, we do believe that parts of our work, particularly the findings of our research on peer institutions, may be of interest to other language faculty. We will gladly share such documents upon request and have already arranged to meet our colleague in German Studies who, earlier this summer, expressed interest in our work.

July, 15th 2021

Student Committee Recommendations Report

After careful consideration, the student committee has come to the conclusion that the Language Assistant is an irreplaceable role. It is clear that there are immense losses in the recreation of a student position and there are many concerns for the following: loss of native speaking ability/ sufficient linguistic ability, absence of cultural knowledge, lack of commitment to the position, and other limitations that will be discussed later in this report. We agree that it is unfavorable to replace the LA role with student hires, it is important to remember that the LA was a unique component to the Hispanic Studies department at Whitman that separated us from other competitive colleges. A former LA described the magnitude of the authenticity as so:

“Whitman should keep in mind the role of the LA on campus in terms of acting as a cultural intermediary, which is the main loss. The presence of an LA on campus will be marked by their cultural heritage in terms of language and behavior. Therefore, they act as a window to a different part of the world, and bring students closer to it, helping create a climate of understanding and respect to cultural differences, and fostering the interest of students on global issues.”

Collectively, we divided the prior role of the LA into these constituent parts:

- Broader Campus Cultural Ambassador
- Mesa Hispana Facilitator
- Casa Hispana Language/ Culture Ambassador
- Thesis Support, Advisor Akin
- Grammar Lessons in 100 - 320 Level Courses

We were divided with respect to which roles could be reimplemented through student hires although several of us believe students would still be competent in these roles. Yet, we came to a unanimous decision about thesis work, deciding that students are simply not qualified and able to support other students in this way. Still, we did brainstorm potential remedies.

Since a student cohort would not be able to support majors with their theses the way LA's have in the past, we propose a thesis support group in addition to the consistent support of professor advisors. These groups would meet weekly or biweekly and include a few (3-6) students who are writing on similar topics or theoretical frameworks. These students would be able to proofread each other's new passages, share worries about the process, etc. We still encourage students to lean on their thesis advisors as much as possible in light of this indispensable department loss.

For the rest of the jobs, in order for this reimplementation to be successful, we have decided that there would need to be some sort of training or workshops available for student hires. Ideally, there would be training to prepare students for grammar lessons and conducting casual/ academic conversations. Additionally, we agreed that the commitment to the job should be no more than 5 hours per week. We have decided to break down the student hire roles as follows:

- Facilitating Mesa Hispana
- Grammar lessons 100-320 (if tested into)
- Collaborating with club LatinX for cultural events

In terms of hiring, we agreed to be more flexible with respect to students' involvement in the Hispanic Studies Department. Students who are interested in taking on one or more of the aforementioned roles would need to have taken a 340 and 400 level course in the department. We agreed that commitment to a high-level course demonstrates rigor and dedication to the Spanish language and culture. Yet, starting from a pool of Hispanic Studies majors may be beneficial.

The role of Cultural Ambassador would consist of organizing bimonthly events collaborating with Casa, Club Latinx, and the department itself. There could be potential movie screenings in Casa (or the new LLC space), cultural potlucks, games, etc. To increase motivation, cultural events could be incentivised by professors via adding a small requirement in their syllabus or offering extra credit for the attendance and subsequent

write up/ reflection of the event. If Club Latinx members help to organize these cultural events, they should receive monetary compensation alongside the student LA.

To address the profound loss within Casa, we proposed a more frequent professor-house dinner in order to motivate Spanish conversation and the introduction of a lasting community and partnership with Club Latinx. This could manifest in a myriad of ways: Casa residents could be required to attend Club Latinx meetings or organize events for the campus (which they already need to do) with the club members. In addition, Casa could offer their space to Club Latinx and invite club members over for dinners, to make traditional latinx meals, listen to some Bad Bunny (please), or whatever the occasion shall call for.

La Mesa Hispana would not change dramatically with a student hire. The student assuming this role should be conversationally fluent and eager to engage and encourage students ranging from various abilities. These student(s) should plan a conversation theme before mesa in case of conversation waning. We want to avoid awkward silences and sadnesses.

Students assuming the role of 'grammar lesson teachers' would require most support as language assistants. One student could take on one course to keep things as simple as possible. We have already mentioned the imperativeness of frequent trainings for these students. These trainings would essentially be hour(ish) long grammar review sessions of the appropriate content for the next week's lessons. A professor would have to dedicate more time and effort for these trainings which is unfortunate.

Kenyon College has a Language AT (assistant teacher) program for the languages. Their role is essentially this: to plan a grammar lesson for students in a respective course weekly or biweekly. This is absolutely a role that current students could take on. Pre-hired writing fellows could also potentially assume the role of grammar teacher in addition to their essay- writing support.

Post discussion, these questions for the professors of the Hispanic Studies Department remained unanswered:

Is there funding to pay a tentative committee of student language assistants? If so, how many hours a week will each student be working, and who will they be paid by? In other words, is this an independent grant, or a Whitman grant?

If there were to be a student language assistant cohort, it would be near impossible to carry out our variable duties with efficacy and efficiency without weekly or biweekly 'training' sessions. Are these meetings possible for professors to commit to given their already busy schedules?

If the Hispanic Studies department is able to hire a language assistant, what will be of the other language departments?

How many students, if a student cohort approach is approved, will be hired (all of us on the council would potentially be interested)?