

**Proposal**  
**DEPARTMENTAL SUPPORT FOR PEDAGOGICAL TRANSFORMATION ACROSS THE SPANISH**  
**MAJOR**  
**Submitted: February 22, 2017**

**Submitted by:**

  
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**Summary**

The three current tenure-track and tenured Spanish Department faculty will spend from May 2017 to October 2018 developing a comprehensive plan to restructure the Spanish Major, including transforming the curriculum and pedagogical methods in the gateway course to the major (Spanish 211); assessing and restructuring the required research course; and reviewing, redesigning and/or replacing the comprehensive exam. We will also take into consideration the existing language course sequence and work with our colleagues to clarify and streamline the multiple paths that majors take through the Department, from language courses, to intermediate culture courses, to study abroad, to advanced culture courses and honors theses [See Appendix A]. As the Department is poised to expand and integrate our curriculum with a new FTE in Spanish Linguistics and the potential addition of an FTE in Latinx Studies, we feel this is an opportune moment to re-envision our major. Our intention is to foster a shared sense of intellectual engagement and community among our students and faculty. Our proposal addresses the following key objectives of the grant: a) redesign syllabi, course materials, or assigned projects, b) revise courses to engage students with one or more high-impact practices, c) respond to recommendations from a recent external review, d) rethink courses that are offered regularly, and e) identify new or alternative pathways within a major.

**Introduction**

The Spanish Department has been profoundly transformed in the last few years, not only by an influx of new faculty, but also by the growing diversity of our students. Students who take courses in our Department – and by extension our majors – are non-native speakers of Spanish,

heritage Spanish learners, and native Spanish speakers. As such, our students represent many backgrounds, learning styles, levels of preparation in our target language, and depths of exposure to the cultures of the Hispanic world on which we focus. Our team consists of one senior faculty member who has been able to observe the evolution of the Department over the last decade, one junior faculty member who joined the Department in 2014, and one senior faculty member who is completing his first year at Amherst. We all agree that the Spanish major is in need of reassessment and restructuring. We see a need to serve our diverse student population by rethinking our learning objectives, course design and materials, classroom pedagogies, and sense of community. Our ultimate aim with this proposal is to incorporate high-impact pedagogies and practices into our major structure that will benefit all members of our Departmental community, assessing these innovations in terms of how they impact students from different backgrounds and previous exposures to Spanish.

The Spanish Departmental underwent an external review in September 2015. In their report, the external committee recommended “redesigning the 5<sup>th</sup> semester or bridge courses with a thematic approach” and noted that “[t]he requirements for the major can point students in the direction of a diverse curricular experience in the Department without setting up different tracks.” The Department took these two areas as points of departure to begin discussing areas in the curriculum that were in need of revision. These conversations have continued throughout the 2016-17 academic year among the three participants in this proposal. After a Departmental Planning Meeting in August 2016, we met with staff from Instructional and Curricular Design Services throughout the fall 2016 semester to map our current curriculum, discuss transformative learning moments, and brainstorm ways we could approach a Departmental transformation of our major. Our current proposal has also been informed by a number of key publications that address the contemporary pedagogical mission of foreign language departments.\* In particular, the 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) report on Foreign Language and Higher Education captures our motivation: “Replacing the two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses, will reinvigorate language departments as valuable academic units central to the humanities and to the missions of institutions of higher learning.” To that end, one of the components of this proposal is for our current and future chairs, Professors Brenneis and Schroeder Rodríguez, to attend an Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL, run under the banner of the MLA) summer seminar, where specific issues pertaining to foreign language departments and pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be addressed.

We have identified a number of critical points of reassessment and consideration for restructuring the major:

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\* Namely, Rogelio Miñana’s [“The New Mission and Location of Spanish Departments in the United States: The Mount Holyoke Experience.”](#) *Profession*, December 2013; [“Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World,”](#) *Modern Language Association* (2007); and Kate Paesani’s [“Interpersonal writing, L2 literacy, and the advanced undergraduate curriculum”](#) (2016).

- 1) *Spanish 211, although fundamental to the major program, must be re-envisioned to engage our diverse students and adequately prepare students for intermediate and advanced culture courses as well as study abroad.*

Spanish 211 was developed five years ago to address a fundamental learning gap between language and culture courses in Spanish majors [See Appendix B]. It is a “5<sup>th</sup> semester or bridge course,” as described by the external review committee. Students who successfully completed the language sequence had not been exposed to the Spanish and Latin American literary canon, nor to the basics of literary analysis on which our 200 and 300-level courses were based. Spanish 211 aimed to consolidate almost 500 years of Hispanic literature along with a basic historical and cultural understanding of Spain and Latin America from the 15th through the 20th century into a one-semester course. Currently, Professors Brenneis, Infante, and Schroeder-Rodríguez alternate instruction of the course, which is offered every semester. We have found the structure of the course as a one semester survey inadequate to our learning objectives. That is, the course attempts to distill too much content and relies on an at-times outdated notion of the canon of Spanish literature as a starting point. Moreover, the textbook on which we relied -- *Momentos cumbres de las literaturas hispánicas* -- is now out of print. Although we continue to feel that this course is necessary to prepare future Spanish majors for their course of study, it is unclear whether our students understand the benefits of Spanish 211 in terms of exposing them to a broad history of Hispanic culture. We would like Spanish 211 to excite students about the possibilities open to them via the Spanish major, while also teaching them crucial skills that will allow them to forge their own path through the courses offered in our Department. Finally, we would like to examine how Spanish 211 and Spanish 199, our other “bridge” course, can serve more complimentary purposes. We have taken initial steps to redesign Spanish 211 for the 2017-18 academic year, including updating the course name to better reflect the content (*Literature and Culture of the Hispanic World*) and identifying a new textbook (*Aproximaciones*) that incorporates a different skill set than the previous textbook. Beginning with the 2017-18 academic year, Spanish 211 is the sole prerequisite for additional 200 and 300-level courses, making it a defacto major requirement.

- 2) *The required Research Course lacks established learning objectives that continue semester to semester.*

For the last eight years, Spanish majors have been required to take a course that has a designated research focus ideally during their sophomore or junior years, but as late as the first semester of their senior year. This “RC” designation migrates among various courses at the 300 level; every semester a 300-level course on a different topic is the research course. Although students appreciate the variety of learning experiences offered via the research courses, consistency is needed to assure that students are learning a common set of skills from one semester to the next. Ideally, the research course would complement the comprehensive exam or a thesis, in that it would teach students basic research skills as well as strategies for finding scholarly resources in Spanish. It could also be envisioned as preparation for a capstone project, should the Department decide to eliminate the comprehensive exam. For these reasons, there is a need to revisit the learning objectives of the research courses, as well as to provide a common point of reference for each research course instructor. Perhaps there are additional skills, such as public speaking, that merit inclusion in the research courses. The idea is not to make the RC courses identical, since

students benefit from learning research skills through a variety of topics, but to establish fundamental capabilities and techniques that would be taught in all research courses, including courses yet to be developed.

3) *Many Spanish majors are underprepared for their comprehensive exams.*

The comprehensive exam for the Spanish major has been in existence for ten years. Students select from a Foundational List of canonical works from the three geo-cultural areas of concentration in the Department -- Spain, Latin America, and Latinxs in the United States -- during the first semester of their senior year. They are then asked to respond to three individualized questions on those texts during the Spring semester of their senior year, producing a nine-page written analysis of the texts and films they have chosen. Although many students have done well on the comprehensive exam, we feel it is time to re-evaluate the exam in terms of its learning goals and student achievement. Some students rightly feel underprepared to be examined on texts they have not studied in their classes; others have not attained the language fluency we would hope of Spanish majors. As an initial step, we have changed the major requirements beginning with the Class of 2018 such that students may complete either the comprehensive exam *or* write an honors thesis. Moreover, beginning with the Class of 2018, students may create their own personalized list of readings and films in consultation with their major advisor; the Foundational Text list will be provided only as suggestions. The grant would allow us to implement these changes while also considering other revisions to the comprehensive exam, including the possibility of eliminating the exam altogether in favor of another type of senior capstone project.

4) *Students frequently declare the Spanish major later in their college career, making it difficult to establish a community of majors with a common set of learning experiences.*

Although we always have a number of students who focus solely on the Spanish major, Spanish is a second major for many others. Some students wait until after they return from a positive study abroad experience in a Spanish-speaking country to declare the major. Although we encourage study abroad for all of our majors, it effectively means that a half to a third of our majors are away from campus for a significant period of their course of study in the Spanish Department. If a major does not declare Spanish until their senior year, we have a compressed period of time in which to impart crucial skills and foster a sense of community among majors. We need to rethink our curricular structure to: a) encourage students to declare the Spanish major before they study abroad, so that they can take advantage of major advising and learn critical skills before they leave campus and while they are abroad, b) steer students returning from study abroad to 300- and 400-level courses upon their return, and c) to foster more communal learning experiences among majors. We have found that our required Research Course is one way to encourage common intellectual experiences. We would like to continue to consider strategies via the structure of the major to encourage declaring the major earlier and to foster community among majors at any point during their Amherst career. Thus, our overarching goal in transforming the Spanish major includes one of the key objectives of the Mellon grant: to “identify new or alternative pathways within [the] major, and develop materials to show students and advisors how the new pathways will work.”

## Proposed Plan

Taking into consideration the above critical areas for reassessment, we propose an integrated approach to reviewing and implementing alterations to the Spanish major. By concentrating on the first three areas identified in the previous section, we aim to also consider as a team the fourth issue, namely the establishment of a more cohesive cohort and the development of alternate pathways through the Spanish major. Although we have designated a leader for the first three initiatives and will work together on the fourth, we will in practice collaborate on all of these areas, in that they are interrelated. We will also include the entire Department in discussions of our proposed curricular changes. Our aim is to assure that we are addressing the “two-tiered language-literature” structure named in the MLA report and allowing for future revisions to the language sequence that will impact the culture sequence. The Spanish major continues to attract committed students, the majority of whom express positive feedback from their experience with the Department. As such, we are not proposing a radical restructuring of the major, but rather a series of thoughtful revisions that would work in concert to make the Spanish major a more holistic experience.

### *1) Redesign Spanish 211*

Leader: Paul Schroeder Rodríguez

Steps: Review content and instruction of similar courses at peer institutions, discuss learning outcomes for this course in comparison to Spanish 199, redesign syllabus, review new textbook(s), select additional course materials, and develop high-impact pedagogical practices suited to the course such as common intellectual experiences, learning communities, collaborative assignments and projects, and writing-intensive learning.

Assessment will be based on course evaluations, enrollments particularly along the spectrum of non-native/heritage/native Spanish learners, skill levels of students who continue into intermediate and advanced culture courses, along with other modes of assessment developed in consultation with Instructional and Curricular Design Services.

Course will be offered in F’17 (Schroeder Rodríguez), S’18 (Brenneis) and F’18 (Infante). Revisions would be rolled out incrementally over an 18 month period.

### *2) Establish Research Course Learning Objectives*

Leader: Sara Brenneis

Steps: Review research-related elements of current RC courses, review content and instruction of similar courses at peer institutions, plan and execute an instructional research workshop with Frost Library Research and Instruction for Department faculty, establish common learning objectives that would be applicable to all RC courses, and develop high impact pedagogical practices (including common intellectual experiences and undergraduate research) in consultation with Frost Library Research and Instruction as well as Instructional and Curricular Design Services.

Assessment will be based on course evaluations, honors thesis evaluations, successful transfer of skills to comprehensive exams and honors thesis, and other modes of assessment developed in consultation with Instructional and Curricular Design Services.

RC courses will be offered in F'17 (Brenneis), S'18 (Schroeder Rodríguez), F'18 (Infante). Revisions would be rolled out incrementally over an 18 month period.

### *3) Review Comprehensive Exam*

Leader: Catherine Infante

Steps: Review comprehensive exam and capstone project major requirements at peer institutions, review departmental goals and key indicators of student achievement for fulfilling major requirements, examine questions and student responses to past comprehensive exams, identify areas of weakness/improvement, review and streamline suggested Foundational Texts, assess success of comprehensive exam requirement changes rolled out for Class of 2018, and investigate the possibility of replacing the exam with a capstone project requirement. If the comprehensive exam is to be replaced, then design a new capstone project requirement for senior majors that could potentially tap global learning, community-based learning, and undergraduate research as relevant high-impact practices.

Assessment will be based on comprehensive exam results for Class of 2018 compared to previous years, student feedback, and other modes of assessment developed in consultation with Instructional and Curricular Design Services. Additional revisions would be rolled out for the Class of 2019 and beyond.

### *4) Develop Community and Alternate Pathways for Majors*

Team effort

Steps: In the course of reviewing, revising, and assessing initiatives 1-3, we will identify and clarify the pathways to the major, examining the course sequence, study abroad timing, research course timing, major requirements (including number of courses required, number taken at Amherst, and number allowed in English), interdisciplinary collaboration (particularly with European Studies, Film & Media Studies, and Latina/o, Latin American and Caribbean Studies), and opportunities for community building.

Assessment will depend on structures developed to evaluate initiatives 1-3 in addition to communication with majors and alumni regarding their experiences with the major.

## **Funding, Assessment and Reports**

Our budget provides for site visits (to or from, depending on the availabilities of our colleagues) to two peer institutions who have recently reinvigorated their Spanish major. Oberlin College has a robust Hispanic Studies Department similar in size and nature to our own Department. In the last few years, they have made a number of changes to their major requirements that would inform our own redesign. The Wellesley College Spanish Department has also been through a

thoughtful redesign. Moreover, Professor Carlos Ramos of Wellesley was one of the members of our external review team in 2015, and we would appreciate his counsel as we continue to address our major revisions.

The ADFL summer seminars take place yearly in May and June. This proposal is timed to allow one of us to attend a seminar this year and one next year.

Our proposal includes the hiring of one student intern per semester for the three semesters of the grant period to gather and review new course materials and resources. These interns would be selected from among our Spanish majors who have taken the courses under examination and therefore have some personal knowledge of the benefits and limitations of the courses under review.

The bulk of the work of redesigning the Spanish major, however, will fall to our three participants over the course of the next 18 months. The honoraria for each reflects the considerable time and effort this project entails.

Our assessments will be tailored to each initiative of our curricular redesign, in consultation with Instructional and Curricular Design Services. In addition, we plan to participate in the Teaching and Learning Collaborative Teaching Circle in F'18, in which each participant will observe his or her colleagues' classes at least twice to provide constructive feedback. This will provide us with an additional layer of internal assessment.

The Spanish Department Chair will be responsible for coordinating reports on the results of this proposal. The designated leader for each of the three initiatives will report on that component to the Department Chair. The participants anticipate presenting our work during a public talk after the grant period has ended.

## **Budget**

### **Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) Summer Seminars:**

Registration: \$595 (x2) = \$1190

Airfare: \$900 (x2) = \$1800

Ground Transportation/Airport Parking: \$150 (x2) = \$300

Housing/Meals: \$250/day (4 days x 2 participants) = \$2000

### **Two-day/three-night site visits to or consultative visits from Oberlin College and Wellesley College [two faculty per visit]**

Airfare: \$900 (x2) = \$1800

Ground Transportation/Airport Parking: \$150 (x2) = \$300

Mileage: \$45

Housing/Meals: \$250/day (3 days x 2 participants) = \$1500

Honoraria for consultants: \$500/per (2 consultants x 2 visits) = \$2000

### **Academic Intern Wages**

3 students, 1 per semester.

13 weeks x 5hrs/week x \$11/hr: \$715 (x3) = \$2145

### **Meeting Costs**

\$500

### **Additional Materials (photocopies, publications, etc.)**

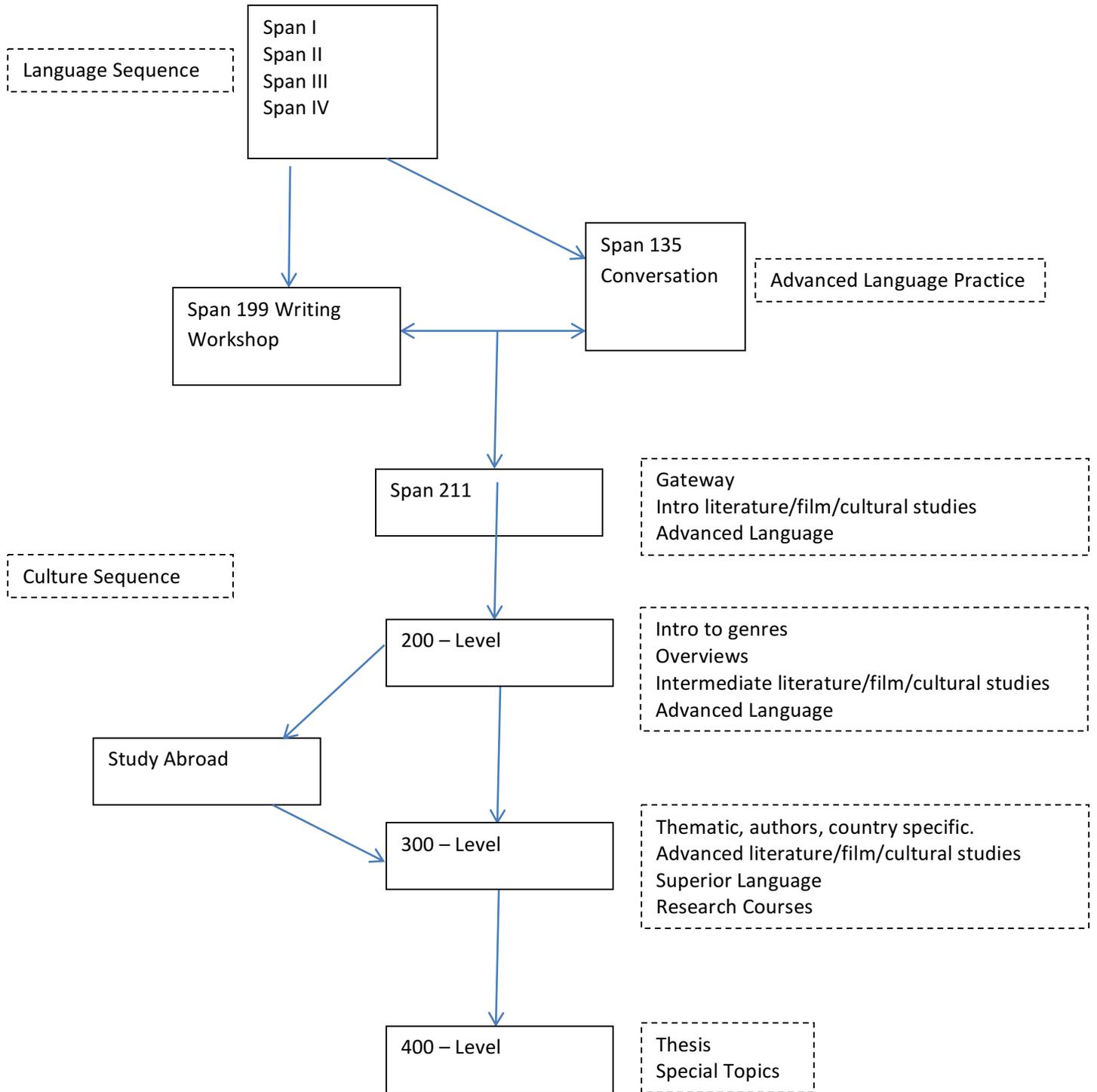
\$500

### **Honoraria for three faculty participants**

\$5000 (x3) = \$15000

**TOTAL: \$29,080**

## Appendix A: Spanish Department Course Sequence



## **Appendix B: Spanish 211 Course Description**

Span 211: Literature and Culture of the Hispanic World [formerly Introduction to Hispanic Literatures]

This course provides an introduction to the diverse literatures and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world over the course of six centuries, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Students will learn the tools, language, and critical vocabulary for advanced work reading the canon of Hispanic literatures from Spain, Latin America and the Caribbean Basin, identifying aesthetic trends, historical periods and diverse genres such as poetry, narrative, theater and film. The syllabus will include a wide variety of authors of different national, political, and artistic persuasions and an array of linguistic styles. Conducted in Spanish.

Limited to 15 students per section.

Requisite: SPAN-199 or consent of the instructor. Advanced knowledge of the Spanish language and proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in Spanish are required.



AMHERST COLLEGE  
Department of Spanish

SARA BRENNEIS, Associate Professor of Spanish

February 22, 2017

Dear Dean Epstein and colleagues:

The Spanish Department supports the Mellon Pedagogical Transformation grant proposal that I, Professor Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez and Assistant Professor Catherine Infante have put forward. The proposal is in line with the Department's goals and plans for the immediate future. The Department is committed to offering Spanish 211 and a research course at least twice and at most every semester in the three years following the award period.

Thank you for your consideration of this proposal.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sara J. Brenneis".

Sara J. Brenneis  
Associate Professor and Chair of Spanish