

Issue #18 Special Report "Letter to the GCC Editor"

**** The opinion featured in this piece does not reflect the beliefs of the caucus, which is a place where graduate students are encouraged to share their views. We welcome reaction pieces in response to this special report.

Next fall, the UCLA Department of Spanish and Portuguese will adopt a hybridized model for its lower-division language classes. This change has come about as a result of pressure from the university's administration to expand the number of course it offers online and as part of a more general drive towards "efficiency" in undergraduate education on campuses across the country. However, there are other causes underlying this overhaul, including the lack of sufficient classroom space and financial pressures. This hybridization initiative at UCLA should also be considered in the context of the massification of the University of California and California State University systems over the past two decades. These sweeping changes echo the "one-size-fits all", impersonal model of education that universities are increasingly imposing on their students.

In addition to removing students from the classroom and diminishing the quality of their undergraduate experience, the hybridization of Spanish and Portuguese courses at UCLA raises questions of equal access and accountability, which have not been addressed by the department or university administration. Students without regular access to computers and internet will face a disproportionate burden if they enroll in these courses. Furthermore, Teaching Assistants were not consulted about these changes and will now be expected to teach students a foreign language in overcrowded classes that meet twice a week. In the editorial that follows, we express our opposition to this cynical decision to hybridize our language classes and to leave our students in the lurch. For

more on the hybridization of language courses, see an in-depth article in The Daily Bruin. <<http://dailybruin.com/2014/05/28/spanish-and-portuguese-classes-to-receive-new-curriculum/>>

Introduction by Zeke Trautenberg

Dear Editor,

We, the undersigned graduate students and Teaching Assistants in the UCLA Department of Spanish and Portuguese, want to express our deep concern regarding the imminent "hybridization" of the department's lower-division language program, which will take effect during the Fall 2014 quarter. This initiative comes at a moment when the university's lack of sufficient physical classroom space and overcrowded classes are reaching a critical juncture and beginning to negatively impact the Bruin undergraduate experience. But using hybridization as a solution to that problem will also have a negative impact on student learning.

This hybridization will not only affect the first year sequence of Spanish and Portuguese classes (1-3, and Portuguese 11A and 11B), but also intermediate Spanish classes (4-5). In all of these courses, the amount of time students spend in the classroom will be significantly reduced and inadequately replaced with an expanded online component.

In the case of Spanish 1-3, our most popular courses, students will attend class twice a week for a total of two hours and forty minutes. Currently students attend fifty-minute class sessions five days a week. In the first-year sequence of Spanish, these changes will reduce the amount of time that students spend in the classroom by 36%, substituting online exercises for face-to-face instructional time with TAs and their peers. Pearson, the company whose textbooks will be used in these lower-division courses, hosted a workshop on the technical aspects of the change. But there has been no comprehensive explanation from faculty about how the change will affect student learning. It is irresponsible to move forward with hybridization without considering how it could affect

students' ability to effectively participate in upper division language, literature and culture courses.

The faculty of the Spanish and Portuguese Department has unilaterally decided to move forward with these controversial changes without public debate or the implementation of a pilot program to test the efficacy of hybridization. Furthermore, the department has not adjusted for the reduced amount of class time by limiting the number of students in our already overcrowded classrooms. Spanish 1-3 classes will continue to have 25 students, 66% over the 15 person maximum recommended by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. We graduate student-workers will remain burdened with overcrowded classrooms on top of being expected to teach our students a foreign language in classes that meet only twice a week. Undergraduates and their parents, who are paying significant tuition dollars, should be concerned over this method of foreign language instruction as well. We believe these changes will be detrimental to the education that we offer our Bruin undergraduates.

It should be noted that our language classes already include a significant online component, but this complements rather than replaces vital face-to-face time in the classroom. The time we spend in the classroom is essential to teaching students how to communicate in a foreign language. The methods we employ, such as using only Spanish and Portuguese with our students and incorporating different kinds of functional, "real-life" activities and situations, are impossible to replicate in an online platform. In communicative classrooms like ours, students work together in small groups and the teacher serves as a facilitator of student learning. Hybridization will limit students' time in the classroom, thereby diminishing the time they spend immersed in the language and culture. These changes will impair our ability to teach at the highest levels of our profession. Collectively, we all deserve better from UCLA. We wonder if the administration and our professors would want their own children taught a foreign language in this highly dilutive and impersonal manner.

Unless Bruin undergraduates make their voices heard to Chancellor Gene Block and Department Head Randal Johnson then hybridization will become an improvised solution for the longer-term problem of insufficient physical classroom space. As a leading public university, UCLA has an important role to play in the transformation of higher education. For this reason, intradepartmental decisions that affect the student body at large should be decided on and implemented in a transparent, constructive and pedagogically congruous way. Unilateralism should not be way to promote change at UCLA. This is why we, the undersigned, feel the need to insist on dialogue, transparency and collegiality as the methods to discuss the pedagogical implications of hybridization of foreign language instruction. We invite you to express your concern by writing to Chancellor Gene Block (chancellor@ucla.edu), Department of Spanish and Portuguese Chair Randal Johnson (randalj@humnet.ucla.edu) and Department Vice Chair for Undergraduate Studies José Luiz Passos (j.l.passos@ucla.edu).

Sincerely,

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García, Michelle Medrado, Daniel Cooper, Andrew Block, Isabel
Gómez and Daniel Whitesell.

Graduate Student Teaching Assistants

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