

Can U.S. Colleges Serve People Who Primarily Speak Spanish?

Higher ed leaves out millions of people who might benefit from bilingual or dual-language programs.

By Eleanore Catolico

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Miami Dade College students Romina Cano, 23, from Peru; Ana Camba, 20, from Venezuela; Fabiana Gonzalez, 20, from Venezuela. They recently earned associate degrees and will transfer to MIT in the fall. Photo Courtesy of Miami Dade College

When Anna Camba moved from Venezuela to the U.S. four years ago, she worried about arriving too “late” in her educational journey to succeed in her new home.

But the Spanish-speaker says she found the support she needed by enrolling in a dual-language program at the Honors College at Miami Dade College, which helped her to pursue higher education in both her native language and in English. Camba just graduated with her associate degree and will transfer to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the fall.

The dual-language program, she says, “allowed me a chance to prove myself and grow professionally, in a way that I can be an acceptable candidate for top schools.”

The U.S. is home to **millions of people** who primarily speak Spanish. In recent years, a few Hispanic-serving institutions have launched bilingual and dual-language programs—as well as programs taught almost entirely in Spanish—to serve these people, who college leaders say have limited postsecondary options in this country.

Unlike their counterparts in K-12 schools, these kinds of programs are still relatively uncommon in higher education. A lack of bilingual instructors and leadership buy-in, and the difficulty of developing a Spanish-only college-level curriculum, are some of the limiting factors that have stymied their growth, experts and university leaders say.

Some language-learning experts support these kinds of programs while also critiquing educators who do not champion linguistic diversity within Spanish, which they argue can exclude or stigmatize students. A narrow perspective about which versions of Spanish are “acceptable” for academic environments may also limit the number of people qualified to teach the language, they add.

While there’s **ample** research showing the personal and cognitive benefits of bilingual education in elementary and secondary schools, **less so** exists evaluating the effectiveness of similar postsecondary programs in boosting student performance, second-language proficiency and employment opportunities after graduation in the U.S. Existing **research** on bilingual higher ed often focuses on college systems outside the States.

Yet higher ed leaders say the demand for bilingual professionals in the U.S. labor market is growing. They’re hearing from employers who want to hire people fluent in both English and Spanish for careers that rely heavily on fluid communication between languages and require significant technical knowledge.

Institutions that do train students who speak Spanish, which include Miami Dade College, Universidad Santander, and Ana G. Mendez University, hope their programs will expand students’ career choices and help them thrive in professional settings.

Cultivating the First Language

When the dual-language program at the Honors College at Miami Dade College launched in 2006, leaders recognized there was a niche of students who spoke Spanish at home but didn't have the chance to develop into fully bilingual students.

“Why are these people speaking Spanish taking classes in Spanish? It's to perfect it. It's not Spanglish,” says Magda J. Castineyra, the interim dean of the Honors College who helps oversee the dual-language program.

“More and more, any kind of job that you find, the bottom line of a job says ‘bilingual preferred,’ everywhere,” she adds. “It used to be specific places, but not anymore.”

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—Magda J. Castineyra

Touted by the college as one of a handful of its kind in the U.S., the dual-language program is geared toward helping students improve the Spanish skills they already have. In order to enroll, students are required to have taken Advanced Placement Spanish courses in high school, which helps the school determine students' fluency. Once admitted, students are required to take two general education courses, whether that's in the liberal arts or business, fully in Spanish. Students don't take any courses in their field of interest or major in Spanish, Castineyra says. Upon completion, students earn an associate degree, and the majority aim to transfer to a four-year university.

The program has slowly gained popularity, which is reflected in enrollment growth, Castineyra says. Back in 2006, it started with 50 students. The program began enrolling classes of 75 in 2020. Now, it currently has about 150 students enrolled.

It's also become a particularly appealing option for people transitioning to the U.S. Most of the dual-language program students hail from Venezuela, Cuba, other parts of South America, Central America and the Caribbean. The program also accepts Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) participants and students who lack citizenship documentation.

“People don't understand how these students come in,” Castineyra says. “They come in with no confidence. They come in with no knowledge of what their real options are. They come in with no knowledge of the American system of education.”

Recent graduates of the dual-language program tell EdSurge they welcomed the challenge of the program's academic rigor, which primed them to transfer to universities, and that their written Spanish improved. The college's extracurriculars and cultural programming, such as events with Spanish-speaking artists, a flamenco series and a program about the history of drumming throughout Latin America, also helped them feel more comfortable living in a new country and more confident in their learning, plus gave them opportunities to practice their language skills outside of the classroom.

One student, Romina Cano, started college during the COVID-19 pandemic after she moved to the U.S. from Peru. That transition wasn't easy.

"I had some nervousness," Cano says. "I was afraid to ask the wrong questions and [thought] people would laugh at it or my accent."

But the sense of community among the students at Miami Dade gave her the confidence and support she needed, she says. She also appreciated the intimacy of smaller class sizes, which gave her a better connection to her teachers.

As much as a dual-language program helps students, it may also help colleges, too. Lisa Petrov, an associate professor of Spanish at Dominican University whose prior work focused on Latino student success, says prioritizing these kinds of programs could help boost an institution's enrollment.

"All institutions are thinking of how they can branch into new student demographics," she says. "A dual-language program is definitely a way to attract students."

That may be especially true for a college located in a community with high numbers of non-English speakers.

"It's a locally-driven need," Petrov says.

For example, all of Miami Dade's campuses, including the one that houses its dual-language program, lie in the heart of the city of Miami. The region's geography and culture give the program key advantages when it comes to recruiting local students. Miami has more than 430,000 residents, and about 78 percent speak a language other than English at home, [according to recent Census figures](#).

The most common one is Spanish.

Expanding Career Options for Spanish-Speaking Adults

Universidad Santander, which has campuses peppered across Latin America, is focusing its efforts on what its leaders see as untapped workforce potential among Spanish-speaking adults in the U.S.

Last month, the university [launched](#) Universidad Santander USA, an online program targeting working adults who primarily speak Spanish and live in the States. Knowing English isn't a requirement to enroll because the classes are taught in Spanish.

"We think we're meeting a need that has so far not been addressed," says Jim Enrique Tolbert, the chancellor of Universidad Santander USA. He says the very large number of Hispanic people

living in the States who don't speak much English have limited higher education opportunities, which also restricts what they can do professionally.

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—Jim Enrique Tolbert

The program is currently enrolling students, who can earn a bachelor's, master's or doctorate degree that Tolbert says are equivalent to U.S. degrees. Classes, many of which are asynchronous, are taught by instructors based in Mexico. Students can go through the curriculum at their own pace, giving them the flexibility to complete credits around a work schedule.

Tolbert hopes to recruit about 50 to 100 students in the inaugural class. The program has the capacity to eventually educate about 2,000 to 3,000 students.

Globalization and immigration have been driving the evolution of the U.S. economy for the last several decades. Tolbert says the new online program helps people who speak Spanish find work in the U.S. in an environment where English is not required. This could fill gaps in the workforce, Tolbert says, adding that the program has garnered support from the business sector, including Hispanic Chambers of Commerce.

“You have a lot of companies from South America, Mexico, doing business in the U.S. So being able to work with your counterparts in Mexico is pretty critical,” Tolbert says.

The program also markets itself as a good option for people who immigrated to the U.S. but who hope to return to their country of origin and try to find a job there.

Tolbert's vision for this program perhaps represents an outlier in the higher ed landscape. Experts say an overall lack of awareness by college leadership that courses for people who primarily speak Spanish are needed has held back their implementation. Petrov describes this thinking as “general cluelessness.”

“Higher ed is still pretty **not just male-dominated, but Anglo- and English- dominant**,” she says.

Tolbert says he hasn't seen another college or university offering a program similar to Universidad Santander USA. The years to come will test whether or not the theory behind it will work.

“We're going to have to prove out what we're saying: that these students will, in fact, improve their professional opportunities,” Tolbert says.

Accelerating Bilingual Higher Ed

Florida's Ana G. Mendez University is a nonprofit organization and subsidiary of Sistema Universitario Ana G. Méndez, a nonprofit college system headquartered in Puerto Rico. The

institution offers courses in both English and Spanish, in person and online, to more than 7,000 graduate and undergraduate students—90 percent of whom identify as Hispanic.

AGM's bilingual classes serve Spanish-speaking students who have some English language skills. Instructors teach a bilingual curriculum, and students can learn industry terminology, write papers and give presentations in both languages. These classes only take place on campus.

“We wanted to make sure that our bilingual instructors were able to see where the students were going, walk them through the process, [and] not have them in an online environment where we're not sure they're actually doing the practicing and doing the assignments,” says Donna Viens, the vice chancellor of academic affairs at AGM.

Students can take bilingual classes to earn diplomas in technical careers like bookkeeping, accounting or phlebotomy, among others. Those pursuing an associate, bachelor's or master's degree can also take bilingual classes, Viens says. She adds that doctorates aren't yet offered bilingually because leaders haven't yet seen the need emerge from students.

The institution is planning to ramp up its bilingual offerings. That shift was partly driven by feedback from employers, who told school leaders they wanted graduates to have a better handle on English terminology specific to their chosen industry.

The bilingual program aims to prepare these students to be nimble in their interactions in the workplace. Viens points out this is often a necessity for those pursuing careers in medical assistance or medical billing. She says employees in those fields often are speaking to patients only in Spanish, but then they must translate that information to either a doctor or a nurse, often in English.

“And when they're doing that, we want them to be able to use the correct terminology and the professionalism needed in these different industries,” Viens says.

The bilingual courses were originally modeled based on what Viens describes as the “subtractive bilingual model,” which phases out the teaching of a student's native language and then helps them boost proficiency in a second language, which in this case, was English.

“As we've developed, we found that it's not necessary to remove one to have the other,” Viens says. “In fact, it absolutely is better for our students if they have both.” So now, the university is in the process of switching to the “additive bilingual model.”

“So we really enforce and appreciate the Spanish language ... [and] the terminology that they need to be a professional,” she says. “But we also give them the English language so that we're supporting them as they get jobs here in the United States, and they may have to speak with somebody who does not know how to speak Spanish.”

This means instructors teach class material in both languages simultaneously, which Viens says many students prefer.

“Native Spanish speakers teach in English but give the information in a handout, which is in Spanish,” Viens says. “Each day, they're doing a little bit of both,” versus learning in a single language each week. “So they're just mixing it all together.”

Whose Spanish?

A shortage of bilingual instructors at the college level is a key reason why these programs aren't commonplace, experts say. It's a challenge AGM often confronts. So Viens says the university relies on a network of alumni to fill these positions. Some of their faculty have been with the school for more than 10 years, but they're still actively trying to recruit new instructors.

“We find very often we can find a great faculty member who can speak in Spanish and in English, but they also have to be able to write and read in both Spanish and English and know their topic in Spanish and English. So it's definitely been a challenge,” she says. “That's a little bit why we've limited the bilingual offerings, because we want to make sure that if we're offering it, we have the faculty member” who is qualified.

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—Donna Viens

Just as with English, there's debate in education about what forms of Spanish are fit for the classroom and just exactly who is qualified to teach those versions of the language.

The Spanish produced in the U.S. is often ignored in higher education in favor of Spanish from Mexico or Spain, according to Blanca Caldas Chumbes, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota whose research interests include bilingual education.

She believes that's a problem for attracting and supporting students who grew up speaking the U.S. variety.

“There are lots of students, a lot of people, who are bilingual in American Spanish that don't populate the classes that we would like them to be [in],” she says.

It may also discourage otherwise qualified people from becoming bilingual instructors because their Spanish variation has been deemed “deficient” throughout their K-12 schooling, Chumbes says.

“We pretend or we say that we can import teachers from Mexico, Colombia, Nicaragua, or Spain,” she says. “[But] we have the people who can do that work here in the United States, but we still think that their variety is wrong because it's multilingual Spanish. And then we don't cater for that population.”

This alleged preference for “standard” Spanish raises questions about whether and how higher education can truly embrace language diversity. It’s a concern more institutions may need to grapple with if the emergence of bilingual programs at the K-12 level eventually pushes more college leaders to rethink what they offer in higher ed.

“Those K-12 students, as they're coming out of school, that's when they're going to say, ‘Well, why aren't we bilingual?’ And as soon as the students start to ask, ‘why not bilingual’, the programs are going to come up,” says Viens of AGM.

Better course and degree options for people who speak Spanish may also become a higher priority for colleges as their leaders consider how to operate more equitably, adds Claire Brady, AGM’s vice chancellor of student affairs.

“If you're talking about access, and you're talking about equity and student outcomes, this is the type of model that really fosters that,” she says. “And so many other institutions will create Spanish-language mission materials or materials for parents, but are not necessarily willing to make the infrastructure changes within their own institution for the students.”

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Miami Dade College continues to see an increase in enrollment, narrowing its gap to a 6% total decline from pre-covid days compared to 12% last fall.

The college was standing at an overall 7% decline during the spring semester compared to pre-covid enrollment. With the completion of the summer semester and now heading into the fall, the decline has decreased by a percentage point, according to Dr. Malou C. Harrison, MDC’s executive vice president and provost.

Miami Dade College saw a large enrollment drop in fall 2020 due to the pandemic, with about 53,500 students compared to almost 61,000 in fall 2019. In September 2020, the college experienced the largest percentage decline at 17%, which was reduced to about 12% during October’s mini-term enrollment push.

Miami Dade is one of the nation’s largest public colleges. Founded in 1959, it now has eight campuses and 21 outreach centers.

“We’re still enrolling right now for our fall 2021 semester because it doesn’t start until Aug. 23, but we’re now 2.1% up in student credits and about 4.7% up in actual students and headcount,” Dr. Harrison said about the increases being seen at all MDC campuses compared to this time last year.

Students who are continuing their studies with the college are at a high rate, with a 19% increase in terms of fall enrollment, she said.

“When we look at first-time students, we are seeing a 13% increase in comparison to last year at this time,” Dr. Harrison said. “In both groups, we are moving in the right direction. The momentum is great.”

When looking at ethnicity and race, there is an 18% increase in Black and 3% in Hispanic student enrollment numbers, she added.

Rising Black Scholars, a new program that was launched during the summer, enrolled 130 local black high school graduates. The instituted program addresses equity gaps and ensures that Black youth in the community have an opportunity with no financial burdens, Dr. Harrison said. “And, equally important is the wraparound holistic services that we will provide for this group of students to ensure that they are successful, both academically and really holistically.”

Another 650 local high school graduates were able to enroll during the summer through the Fast Track Sharks program.

“These students took six college credits as a leg up and their intro to college as they move into the fall term, fully enrolled as students,” Dr. Harrison said. “This summer has been and continues to be very robust for us in terms of enrollment, but what we’re most proud of is the young people who we have been able to bring in early to give them that jumpstart in college.”

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