

Creating and Sustaining a Program of Study in Portuguese

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Introduction

In the fall of 2005 the Foreign Languages Department at Bridgewater State College submitted a Portuguese minor proposal to its governance system. The proposal was approved, signed by the president in spring 2006, and classes were officially offered in fall of 2006. This paper is an account of the rationale for creating a Portuguese program and the steps taken in order to make sure that the program continues to be successful.

Geography is almost everything in this case. According to data offered by the [MLA Language Map](#), approximately 19% of Massachusetts residents speak a language other than English (mostly Spanish or a Spanish-based Creole). Out of those second language speakers, about 2% (or close to 160 thousand) speak Portuguese or a Portuguese-based Creole. However, this number does not reveal the true presence of Portuguese heritage in the state, particular in the Southeastern region (Bristol County) and right across the border, in the state of Rhode Island. The town of Bridgewater is close to several of these Massachusetts communities with a significant number of Portuguese speakers. According to a 1999 study conducted by the Center for Policy Analysis at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, almost one-third of residents in Southeastern Massachusetts are of Portuguese heritage. But in certain cities and towns, that percentage is much higher: “approximately 48.5% of Fall River's residents, 43.1% of New Bedford's residents, and 39.8% of Dartmouth's residents claim Portuguese as their primary ancestry” (Center for Policy Analysis, 1999:1). The study also states that when secondary ancestry is taken into account, these percentages increase accordingly. As far as those of Cape Verdean descent, the study states that respondents in the U.S. Census of 1990 had the option of identifying themselves as “Portuguese”, “African-American”, or “Other.” Unfortunately, with the existing data, it is impossible to determine how many Cape Verdeans are included in the category of “Portuguese ancestry.” However, Cape Verdeans are very numerous in cities such as Brockton, where radio and TV stations carry programming in Cape Verdean Creole. Brazilians are also part of the equation. In a

workforce report published a decade ago, there were at least 15 thousand Brazilians residing in Massachusetts (Sum & Fogg 1999:38). More recently, the American Community Survey reported that there were around 72 thousand Brazilians living in Massachusetts, or around 20% of the total number of Brazilian-born people in the United States (Davis 2008). In fact, these numbers might be higher if we factor in the number of undocumented immigrants.

Thus, it is safe to assume that equitable numbers of Portuguese heritage people and Portuguese speakers are attending higher education institutions in Massachusetts. Incoming freshmen at Bridgewater State College are asked to fill out a profile card which includes the survey item “Please list any or all languages --including English-- that you speak at home”. Table 1 shows the number of students who have claimed Portuguese as one of those languages.

Table 1. Freshmen Class (Bridgewater State College) and Portuguese Spoken at Home

Freshman Class	Number of students listing “Portuguese” as home language
Fall 2009 (N=1,479)	29
Fall 2008 (N=1,502)	46
Fall 2007 (N=1,584)	32

[The Office of Institutional Research](#) informs us that compliance ratios for these surveys are around 98%. However, not all students responding to the survey opt to answer this particular “home language” question. Despite this fact, the number of students who have claimed Portuguese as a home language is close to 2% of the incoming class, which is a percentage equal to that of the number of residents in Massachusetts who claim Portuguese ancestry on the latest Census data.

With those numbers in mind, and based on our own experience teaching Portuguese at the college, it seemed like a logical academic step to establish a program in which the study of Portuguese was the central focus. Rationale for the program was based on the fact that students take Portuguese in order to maintain their proficiency in their ancestral tongue. This in turn contributes to the vitality of the language in Southeastern

Massachusetts. Students who are traditional learners of Portuguese have a great interest in becoming fluent. Their reasons can be related to several types of motivation (Gardner & Lambert 1972, Gardner 2001, Gardner et al 2004), including instrumental motivation, such as getting a job in which they have to speak Portuguese, as well as integrative motivation, when students want to become more part of the lusophone society. Regardless of the natural idea for a Portuguese specialization at Bridgewater State College, there were considerable obstacles to establishing the program. The most important one was the fact that right next door (a distance of only 35 miles) the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth has a Portuguese program which is one of the largest and most successful in the country.

Getting the data: create and run surveys

It is very important to first get all the necessary data for approval of the program. We ran surveys among students in all of the Portuguese classes about their interest in a Portuguese minor program. We asked about the types of classes that they would like to take, the number of credits they would be willing to take to complete a minor, the kinds of activities that they would participate in, and the cultural or dialectal focus of the classes that they would be interested in taking. We obtained IRB approval before conducting the surveys and later organized the results in easy-to-read tables. Table 2 shows the results pertaining to the types of classes students were mostly interested in. The topics and classes were listed next to a column of checkboxes which students were asked to check if they were interested in that particular type of class.

Table 2. Type of class and positive student interest, in decreasing order (N=28)

Type of Class	Positive Responses
Grammar Review	20
Speaking Practice	19
Intermediate Portuguese	17
Culture and Civilization of Portugal	12
Culture and Civilization of Brazil	10
Survey of Portuguese Literature	9
Survey of Brazilian Literature	5

There were 28 respondents who checked the boxes for the courses that they were most interested in pursuing. The results showed that most students were interested in language preparation classes, specifically grammar review and speaking classes, closely followed by culture or civilization classes. They were also more interested in Continental Portuguese and by the Portuguese spoken in the Azores and Madeira. Thus, at least in absolute numbers, they were more interested in the culture of Portugal rather than the culture of Brazil, although the percent difference was minimal. We used the results to support the framework of the Portuguese Minor and to talk to various stakeholders in the Foreign Languages Department.

Getting support: meet with stakeholders

Obviously, it is of utmost importance to get the support of all stakeholders in the creation of a new program. Program developers should identify and contact professors and instructors who could teach various courses in the program. They should talk to their college Dean for institutional support, so they may be able to hire part-timers for additional classes, get subvention for lectures and workshops, and purchase educational materials in Portuguese. By the same token, the support of the governance committees and the Department Chair are essential for a program to be approved and supported. These steps are necessary for the establishment and continued growth of the program.

Getting approval: write the proposal and follow up

After significant political and academic support is attained, program developers should write up the learning outcomes for each of the new courses as well as the rationale for the entire program in clearly stated language. Conversations with stakeholders should anticipate the questions that would be asked by governance representatives. Anticipating those questions and writing up clear answers is critical for a program to get approved and become part of the make-up of an institution.

Such was the case of the Portuguese program at Bridgewater State College. The most important question asked by governance and administrators was the *sustainability* of the program in terms of significant human resources needed to teach the new courses. Could the program run with the current Portuguese staff at the College? Would the department need an additional line for a full-timer in Portuguese? Would the number of

students be large enough to support a major program in the future? These questions were successfully answered during several governance meetings. The College currently has the necessary number of dedicated part-timers who teach elementary and intermediate classes in Portuguese. The Foreign Languages Department has made requests for a full-time professor in Portuguese language and culture, but the number of minors still does not warrant the hiring of such a specialized professional. Nevertheless, the program has grown in popularity (see Table 3) and the number of students taking Portuguese courses has increased.

Sustaining and growing the program

One of the most important aspects of adding a new program at an institution is establishing checkpoints that will help evaluate it. One suggestion is to determine each semester the number of students who have declared the Portuguese minor and thus have added the program to their academic coursework. The other is to determine the number of students taking Portuguese classes in general, in each Fall semester. Table 3 reveals these numbers in detailed fashion.

Table 3. Number of students taking Portuguese in consecutive Fall semesters.

Semesters	Number of Students of Portuguese
Fall 2010 (currently registered)	71
Fall 2009	63
Fall 2008	56
Fall 2007	41
Fall 2006	65

Once the program is established, the department(s) housing the program should continue to strive to maintain its health in numbers. That can be accomplished by making sure that students know about the program during advising week each semester. This is a crucial aspect of a successful program because the work of faculty in encouraging students to take courses is indispensable. In addition, if there is a coordinator for the program, he or she should organize lectures and workshops that will support and sustain

the program. In our case, the department chair does double duty in coordinating the program.

Other suggestions include talking to the marketing department at one's institution in order to create strategies to advertise the program, talking to the chairs of the "top three" largest academic departments to determine if they might be interested in establishing collaborations (i.e. Criminal Justice, Communications, Psychology) and talking to the Office of Regional Development or similar department in order to establish connections with the local Portuguese communities.

Conclusion

Creating and maintaining a program in a critical language such as Portuguese can have its ups and downs. At Bridgewater State College a new "core" curriculum was established in the fall of 2006, the same year that the Portuguese Minor was added to the Catalog. However, in this new framework, students are not required to take a foreign language in order to complete an undergraduate degree, although languages count for a "global culture" requirement. This curricular change has had a deleterious effect on our Portuguese offerings: students are completing the basic level of language (elementary classes) and not continuing to more advanced levels. Despite this setback, we have maintained the number of students taking Portuguese elementary classes, although we have not increased the number of students who have "declared" the minor. That number has hovered around five or six students since the inception of the minor.

As we continue to improve our program, we will consider making changes based on student surveys. Some of the feedback from our students has prompted us to consider adding cognate courses in History, Anthropology and Geography, thus establishing a more interdisciplinary quality to the program. Finally, we will continue to review the learning outcomes of the courses and the program within the five-year program review cycle for the language department.

Works Cited

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