Creating a Culture for Heritage Speakers in the Midwest:
Promoting Spanish and French as Heritage Languages among Undergraduate Students

Across Iowa, speakers of Spanish and French are a small proportion of the total population, but as racial/ethnic minority populations continue to grow, linguistic diversity grows with them. While 6% of Iowans are Latinx, in smaller towns, such as West Liberty, they are a numerical majority. Furthermore, there are significant Francophone populations in larger cities such as Cedar Rapids where newcomers from countries such as the DRC and Haiti have settled. Despite obvious differences (e.g. rural vs. urban communities in Iowa, Spanish-English bilingualism vs. multilingualism with French and other languages), we seek to identify commonalities for student success for university students from these disparate backgrounds.

As language faculty at a medium-sized comprehensive public university, it is imperative that we meet the needs of heritage learners in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. This research looks expansively at how our institution has made meaningful connections with heritage speakers of Spanish and French, how these students conceive their academic, cultural, and linguistic sense of institutional belonging, and the practices we have (and should) develop to cultivate a culture for heritage speakers and their academic success (Prada & Pascual y Cabo, 2022).

This research is based on survey data with heritage speakers of Spanish and French (current students and recent graduates), interviews, and a review of demographic trends and academic outcomes. Our research explores the academic experiences of students who studied their heritage language at the collegiate level and, just as importantly, those who did not--making an inquiry into the role of language in academic place making in tandem with other campus entities (e.g. student organizations, academic support offices).

We also explore institutional practices such as course offerings, retro credits for heritage learners, recruiting practices, and the visibility of heritage languages in public spaces (e.g. public lectures, student newspaper).

Reference: