ABSTRACT

BROOKS, RACHEAL MARIE. Tres Dimensiones de Aprendizaje: Language Learning Beliefs of Successful Spanish-language Learners at an HBCU. (Under the direction of Dr. Joy G. Gayles.)

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. The research questions that guide this study include: What learning experiences and methods do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU perceive to be beneficial to the acquisition process? How do the internal and external motivations of Spanish language learners at an HBCU influence their experiences in the language acquisition process? In what ways do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU interact with the target culture or language? The use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis, framed by Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model and Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework, provided insight into the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU. Three major themes surfaced from data: 1) Constructing Language Learner Selves: From Me to ‘Mí’, 2) Navigating the Path to Proficiency, and 3) Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories.

Based on students’ perspectives, the findings of this study suggest that overcoming issues related to the development of language learner identities and language socialization contributes to increased confidence in other areas of language study. Findings also demonstrate that reading in the target language, communicating with other Spanish speakers, using technological resources, and seeking help from others aided in the understanding of the Spanish language. Additionally, students agreed that the academic and emotional support
they received from faculty members in the Spanish program greatly impacted their decisions to persist with the study of Spanish. Resulting from the findings of the study, the researcher suggests that HBCU Spanish programs should restructure curricula to include topics that represent the diversity of the Spanish-speaking world, develop a mentoring system for first- and second-year students in the Spanish program, and implement a success-oriented workshop series for future Spanish language students.
Tres Dimensiones de Aprendizaje: Language Learning Beliefs of Successful Spanish-language Learners at an HBCU

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving husband, Tenahr, and my super awesome son, Amihr who sacrificed so much to see one of my biggest dreams come true. ¡Los amo mucho!
BIOGRAPHY

Racheal Marie Brooks grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina. She is currently a Visiting Lecturer of Spanish at North Carolina Central University in the Department of Language and Literature and with the Division of Extended Studies. She is also a third year, full-time doctoral candidate in the Educational Research and Policy Analysis program at North Carolina State University with a specialization in Higher Education Administration. She is happily married to her high school sweetheart, Tenahr, and they are the proud parents of one magnificent, energetic, three-year-old son, Amihr. Her research interests include: policies and practices associated with the instruction of Spanish at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs); second language learner beliefs; online instruction; online curriculum development; and minorities in Spanish language studies and instruction.

She decided to pursue a doctoral degree in educational research as a result of challenges faced in the teaching environment. As an instructor of Spanish at multiple institutions, she found that there were inconsistencies in the approaches to curriculum development, the creation of program and student learning outcomes, and the assessment of students. Simultaneously, several of these programs endeavored to redesign existing Spanish-language programs as a result of undesirable student performance and low enrollment in upper-level courses. It was then that she realized that she could be most beneficial in the effort to improve student success in Spanish-language education if she gained a deeper understanding of program development and assessment, theories regarding adult learners,
organizational structures and operations, and policies related to higher education.

After graduation, she plans to continue her work as a Spanish instructor and increase her participation in the growth of undergraduate Spanish language programs and distance education programs. With the knowledge she has gained from the doctoral program, she hopes to serve as a resource for instructors as they continue to improve Spanish language programs and face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses in all disciplines.
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To all of my high school friends and sorority sisters. I’m afraid that if I tried to name all of you, I’d look at this dissertation after publication and realize I forgot to list the person I talked to just yesterday! So instead, let me just thank you all! Some of you have been with me since I was five years old, and others have just recently joined this life journey with me. Regardless of how long I have known you, please know that the happiness you bring to my life made this process that much sweeter. Thank you for the text messages and emails to check up on me. Thank you for the random phone calls making sure I wasn’t drowning myself in assignments and to-do lists. Thank you for forcing me to meet you for lunches, dinners, and workout sessions. Thank you for making me take a break just to have a cup of coffee. And thank you for inviting me to share in all of your life events. I am so grateful for each of you!

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

"A pervasive lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and foreign languages threatens the security of the United States as well as its ability to compete in the global marketplace and produce an informed citizenry... Higher education needs the capacity to serve as a resource on the politics, economics, religions, and cultures of countries across the globe, countries whose positions on the world stage change over time, often in unpredictable ways" (National Research Council, 2007)

Statement of the Problem

The events of September 11, 2001 forced the government of the United States to reassess the nation’s role on the international stage and drew attention to the cultural and linguistic competence of its citizens (National Research Council, 2007). In the aggregate, an evaluation of the country’s internationalization efforts presents disappointing results, particularly as it relates to the responsibilities of American colleges and universities in the education of its citizens. A report produced by the American Council on Education (ACE) succinctly describes the shortcomings of American institutions of higher education in this regard and the impending consequences:

When carefully scrutinized as a whole…a snapshot of the state of internationalization emerges. Unfortunately, this picture leaves much to be desired: Foreign language enrollments are low; international courses constitute only a small part of college and university curricula; study abroad, although increasingly available in a variety of contexts, remains an undervalued and underutilized means of instruction; internationalization as an institutional concept worthy of campus-wide integration is rare; and most graduates are ill-prepared to face the global marketplace of employment and ideas” (Hayward, 2000, p. 4)
The ACE defines internationalization as “the efforts of institutions to incorporate global perspectives into teaching, learning, and research; build international and intercultural competence among students, faculty, and staff; and establish relationships and collaborations with people and institutions abroad” (American Council on Education, 2014). Internationalization also includes the foreign language requirements for college entrance and degree attainment in addition to sponsorship of international programs (Committee for Economic Development, 2006). As a result of the changing demographics of the United States and the increased need to participate in a global community, the importance of internationalizing American institutions of higher education cannot be neglected. Paramount to the goal of campus internationalization is the evaluation and improvement of foreign language programs.

**National Security**

Unfortunately, the American educational system does not emphasize the study of languages other than English (National Research Council, 2007). For example, of the combined 1,837,258 Bachelor’s, Master’s, and doctoral degrees awarded in the United States in 2000-2001, foreign-language education comprised only 192 of the Bachelor’s degrees, 265 Master’s degrees, and 13 doctoral degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Nevertheless, a renewed interest in the study of foreign languages and cultures now exists stemming from recent threats to the nation (National Research Council, 2007).

As a result of the State Department’s and intelligence services’ shortage of specialists in the field of language, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) created the Independent
Task Force to evaluate the impact of this deficit and its potential risks to the security of the nation (Klein & Rice, 2012). The Task Force submitted a series of reforms to improve the existing educational system—one of which urges the expansion of the Common Core curriculum to include the instruction of foreign languages. Condoleezza Rice, Co-Chair of the Task Force, describes that educational failure puts the United States’ future economic prosperity, global position, and physical safety at risk. Leaving large swaths of the population unprepared also threatens to divide Americans and undermine the country’s cohesion, confidence, and ability to serve as a global leader (p. 4)

For the United States, this means that the underdevelopment of language and cultural programs in schools could result in a variety of repercussions for the nation. One consequence of this omission is that graduates of American institutions as a whole will be ill equipped to fully participate in the changing national landscape. Furthermore, the lack of a sufficient number of linguists and analysts in government agencies could jeopardize the country’s military and diplomatic position in the global community.

**Participation and Competition in a Global Community**

In May 2012, the Subcommittee on the Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia—under the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs—met to discuss language proficiency within the federal government (Ochoa, 2012). During the hearing, the Honorable Eduardo Ochoa, Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education,
testified on the importance of multilingualism as it relates to the issue of national security.

Ochoa stressed that

in today’s globalized world, no nation can launch a fully effective domestic education agenda without also addressing global needs and trends and nurturing a globally competent citizenry. The reality is that a hyper-connected world requires individuals to have strong 21st century skills and a disposition to engage in the world around them (p.2).

As Ochoa warns, when assessing educational systems, nations must consider the abilities students will need to thrive in a global community. National boundaries are progressively blurring through globalization and increased reliance on technology; therefore, language proficiency and cultural competence are indispensable skills that all students should acquire (National Research Council, 2007). Furthermore, an increase in the number of individuals who are capable of speaking more than one language will improve the economic competitiveness of the United States within the global community and will encourage cultural tolerance through education (Marcos & Peyton, 2002).

A key component of this endeavor is the strengthening of the American education system. To develop knowledgeable global citizens, students should begin the study of different languages and cultures from elementary school and persist through higher education (Committee for Economic Development, 2006). Schools at all levels should instruct on the role of the United States within the world and provide opportunities to explore cultures and nations in addition to their own (p. 19). The institution of a more culturally extensive
curriculum at all levels of education is especially important in light of the rapidly changing demographics of the country. According to approximations of the nation’s expected growth, there will be a demand for persons from underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities to earn college degrees and enter into the workforce (Mann, 2011). In order to meet this need however, all types of educational institutions must commit to internationalizing their curricula.

**Diversity in the Workplace**

Employers in the United States and worldwide strive to diversify their businesses and organizations by hiring qualified individuals who are capable of addressing a variety of culturally sensitive issues (Knight, et al., 2012). The advent of the Internet enhanced this initiative by making collaborations with organizations on an international level more accessible. Nevertheless, a diverse workforce also introduces opportunities for conflict with regard to the intersection of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of individuals from differing racial, ethnic, religious, or political backgrounds (p. 232). These convergences occur at the global level and, increasingly, within the United States as the demographics of the country steadily evolve and people of color become the new majority (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

In 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau released a report regarding projections for the working-age population of the United States by the middle of the century. It states that by the year 2039, minorities will make up more than 50 percent of the working-age population and will reach 55 percent by 2050. At the time of the report, minorities comprised 34 percent of
the working-age population. More specifically, in 2050, the Census Bureau expects Asians to make up 9.6 percent of the working-age population, while blacks and Hispanics will account for 15 percent and 30 percent, respectively. These estimations should put institutions of higher education on alert as a result of current trends in the enrollment and graduation rates of minorities.

Between 1988 and 2008, the American Council on Education found that all racial and ethnic groups exhibited a growth in enrollment, and this trend is expected to continue (Ryu, 2010). For example, projections indicate that in 2019, American Indians and Alaskan Natives will increase enrollment by five percent, whites will increase by seven percent, blacks and Asian/Pacific Islanders will increase by 30 percent, and Hispanics will increase enrollments by 45 percent. Despite the rise in enrollment for these groups, blacks and Hispanics will continue to comprise a much smaller population of college students than whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders. Furthermore, blacks and Hispanics are less likely to complete degree programs than their white and Asian/Pacific Islander counterparts. As a result, research should not only address how to prepare students for a more globalized world, but it should also investigate ways to increase the retention and graduation of more minorities from American institutions of higher education (Knight, et al., 2012).

**Changing Demographics**

Current estimates regarding the shifting racial and ethnic composition of the United States suggests that by 2050, approximately 54 percent of the country’s population will identify as either black, Hispanic, or Asian (Mann, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).
Furthermore, by 2023, children with racially and ethnically varied backgrounds will claim the majority (Mann, 2011). Efforts to internationalize the current educational system must be made now in preparation for the education of the nation’s future racially and ethnically diverse professionals (Li, 2012; National Research Council, 2007).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), the expected growth for the non-Hispanic, single-race white population is 199.8 million in 2008 to 203.3 million in 2050. The black population in the United States is projected to increase from 41.1 million to 65.7 million from 2008 to 2050. These figures represent a 1 percent increase in the black population from 14 percent to 15 percent during this period. The projected population shift for Asians during the same period is from 15.5 million to 40.6 million—an increase from 5.1 percent to 9.2 percent. American Indians and Alaska Natives will collectively increase in size from 4.9 million to 8.6 million by 2050, while members of the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander populations will increase from 1.1 million to 2.6 million. Additionally, persons who identify as members of two or more races will increase from 5.2 million in 2008 to 16.2 million in 2050.

The Hispanic population, which is currently the largest minority group in the United States, is expected to experience the greatest increase among all racial and ethnic groups by 2050 (Leeman, 2006; Pomerantz, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Between 2008 and 2050, this group will almost triple in size from 46.7 million to 132.8 million. As a result, Hispanics will comprise 30 percent of the American population in 2050. This means that almost every one in three individuals living in the United States would identify as Hispanic (U.S. Census
The current status of Hispanics as the largest ethnic group in the United States coupled with the projected growth of this population by 2050 suggests that schools at all levels should invest in the assessment and enhancement of their foreign language programs—particularly with regard to the Spanish language and culture.

**Spanish in the United States**

The prevalence of the Spanish language in the United States is not a recent phenomenon. The Spanish language is spoken worldwide and is the official language for more than twenty countries and international bodies (Macías, 2014). Among this cohort is the United States, which is considered one of the largest Spanish-speaking countries (p. 34). Part of this designation stems from the historical presence of Spanish-speaking peoples in what is now the United States of America (Alonso, 2007; Estrada, 1985; Lozano, 2011).

During the nineteenth century, the expansion of U.S. territories incorporated more than 2 million square miles that were formerly governed by Mexico, Spain, or other Spanish-speaking governments (Macías, 2014). This area equates to almost two thirds of the current United States. In response to the continued use of the Spanish language in these areas, for more than two hundred years, the U.S. has acknowledged the official use of Spanish within federal, state, and local governments (Alonso, 2006; Fedynskyj, 1971; Lozano, 2011; Macías, 2014). Furthermore, the number of Spanish speakers nationwide has increased at a rate faster than any other linguistic group. For example, the amount persons who speak Spanish increased 211% from 1980 to 2007 (Macías, 2014). This figure greatly overshadows the growth of all non-English speaking populations at 140% between 1980 and 2007. Of
these non-English speakers, Spanish speakers made up 48% of the demographic in 1980 but grew to 62.3% (p. 48). In contrast, the English-only speaking population decreased from 89% to 80% in 1980 and 2007, respectively. If the United States intends to prosper as a nation through the unity of its people, it must educate its students to be culturally competent through curricula that are as linguistically diverse as its residents (Alonso, 2007; Klein & Rice, 2012; Macías, 2014).

**Spanish Language Study at American Institutions of Higher Education**

The changing demographics and their subsequent impact on the American workforce in all sectors requires that U.S. institutions of higher education place particular emphasis on aiding students to become proficient communicators in the Spanish language (Leeman, 2006; Macías, 2014; Pomerantz, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). According to the most recent data reported by the Modern Language Association, enrollment in Spanish language courses at the collegiate level accounts for 53% of the foreign language enrollments for all two- and four-year colleges totaling 864,986 students (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010). As a result, the number of students enrolled in Spanish courses at this level surpasses the amount of students enrolled in the study of all other foreign languages combined (Alonso, 2007; Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010; Welles, 2004).

Although students attending American colleges and universities are more likely to study Spanish as an additional language, interest in upper-level Spanish study is declining (Alonso, 2007; Garfinkel, 1987; Simon, 1980; Speiller, 1988). The ratio of enrollment in lower-level courses versus upper-level courses in Spanish is 5:1, nationally (Howard, 2007).
This figure illustrates researchers’ claims that many students choose not to continue the study of languages beyond the initial two years (Alonso, 2007; Garfinkel, 1987; Simon, 1980; Speiller, 1988). Research reveals that one possible contributing factor to this trend was frustration with grammar-centered instruction (Glynn, 2007; Moore, 2005). For example, in an examination of adult foreign language learners through the use of autobiographies, Tse (2000) found that students were dissatisfied with the overemphasis on the instruction of grammar and minimal opportunities to practice oral communication skills. Research also suggests that student apathy toward continued language study may also be impacted by the reliance on textbook-driven curricula that often exclude authentic opportunities to practice the language in a real-world context (Kleinsasser, 1993).

The issues regarding attrition rates in foreign language study are even more alarming for minority students. On average, minority students are less likely to enroll in foreign language courses than their white counterparts (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Peters, 1994). In the most recent figures provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), African American students received only 4.4% of all foreign language bachelor’s degrees awarded during the 2012-2013 school year. Studies suggest that this may be due in part to students’ beliefs about foreign language study as a field for Caucasians only (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; Peters, 1994), lack of cultural relevance to the student (Clowney & Legge, 1979), and biases imposed on heritage learners by their instructors (Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Villa & Villa, 1998).
Unfortunately, the decision not to persist to advanced levels of second language study may deter some individuals from becoming functionally communicative in the target language. In their investigation of the challenges facing American institutions of higher education in the study of language, Malone, Rifkin, Christian, and Johnson (2005) reported that students require approximately 1,320 hours of language study to reach high levels of proficiency. However, if students end their language study after only two years, they would receive closer to 180 hours of language instruction. With less than 14% of the suggested amount of language study, students who elect not to pursue advanced exposure in the language lack the necessary contact hours to achieve high levels of language proficiency.

The repercussions of limited language proficiency are far-reaching on both an individual and societal level. People who are able to communicate in more than one language have been shown to have more employment opportunities, greater ease communicating with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and greater cognitive control than their monolingual counterparts (Abu-Rabia, 1999; Armstrong & Rogers, 1997; Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; Cutshall, 2004, 2005; Kinberg, 2001). Additionally, the societies in which bilinguals participate experience increased economic, political, and social advantages within their boarders and abroad (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Hanson, 2003; Klein & Rice, 2012; National Research Council, 2007; Ochoa, 2012). By failing to understand and improve the conditions impacting language-learning success among minority students, the United States runs the risk of prohibiting nearly half of its citizens from receiving the benefits of
bilingualism and decreases the magnitude of societal benefits that would result from having more bilingual citizens.

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have the unique opportunity to assist the nation in solving this problem through their efforts to internationalize curricula. According to a 2005 study by the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), 62 percent of the 53 institutions that responded to the survey acknowledged that they included the goal of internationalization in their missions. Furthermore, despite their inception as institutions primarily geared toward the education of African Americans, HBCUs have gained popularity for their educational influence well beyond the Black community. In fact, these institutions have experienced a 45% increase in the enrollment of non-African American students since 1976 (Mixon et al., 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; St. John, 1998; St. John & Hossler, 1998). With a commitment to language study for all students as evidenced by the adoption of foreign language graduation requirements among nearly 95% of all HBCUs (UNCF, 2005), these schools form an integral part in the linguistic education of our country.

Nevertheless, although the majority of HBCUs expose their students—many of whom are underrepresented minorities—to language study, these schools are not immune to the national trends that suggest a declining interest in the advanced levels (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; Peters, 1994). Consequently, although HBCUs equip their students to be successful in fields such as the sciences, technology, mathematics, and education, the lack of advanced study in a foreign language may exclude them from
opportunities to apply these skills within and beyond our nation’s borders. It is important to research what impacts students’ decisions to persist to levels of advanced studies in the languages at HBCUs in order to ensure the graduation of more linguistically proficient future professionals.

In an effort to understand success in the process of second language acquisition, existing research focuses on topics regarding learner identities and motivations such as language socialization (Ochs, 2002; Poole, 1992; Rymes, 1997), individual skill and motivation (Gass & Selinker, 2001), and academic, social, political, personal, and material rewards of proficiency in a second language (Dörnyei, 2003, 2005, 2009; Gardner, 1985, 2001). Notwithstanding the importance placed on the individual characteristics of second language learners and their possible intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, second language learning research overlooks the probable correlations between the above-mentioned components. Furthermore, researchers neglect to relate these elements to the environment in which they occur. More specifically, research in this field overlooks the experiences and beliefs of students who attend historically Black colleges and universities in relation to their interaction with and acquisition of the Spanish language.

The context in which learning is situated is especially important with regard to historically Black colleges and universities due to the higher likelihood that minority students at these institutions will encounter faculty from similar ethnic and racial backgrounds and will study culturally relevant curricula in comparison to their counterparts at predominantly White institutions (Cox, 2010; Hernandez, 2000; Mayo, Murgaia & Padilla, 1995; Tracey &
Sedlacek, 1987). By examining students’ beliefs regarding their success in the study of Spanish through a multidimensional learning lens, researchers can begin to theorize regarding how various personal, curricular, and environmental factors interact with one another and subsequently impact the acquisition process. Furthermore, by bounding this investigation within the context of an HBCU, this study aimed to explore the impact a minority-serving institution has on these internal and external interactions.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

Second language acquisition literature continues to delve deeper into the process of learning and instruction. Nevertheless, the current body of knowledge neglects the impact of the individual learner in conjunction with content and the environment in which the learning takes place. More explicitly, existing literature does not address the experiences of HBCU students regarding their contact with and attainment of the Spanish language.

In this study, I investigated how students perceive the way in which their cognitive abilities, motivations, and environments shaped their Spanish language learning experiences. In contrast to the current body of knowledge, I endeavored to understand how students perceive this interaction within the context of a historically Black institution. As such, a conceptual framework that provided an integrated platform for the analysis of these components was necessary for this study. To address these issues, I used Illeris’ (2002) three dimensions of learning model to structure my research. This framework identifies three components essential to the learning process: the content—or cognitive—dimension, which is associated with the learner’s knowledge, understanding, and skills; the incentive
dimension, which pertains to the student’s motivations, emotion, and volition; and the interaction dimension, which focuses on the learner’s actions, communication, and cooperation within the learning environment. The combination of these dimensions allows the learner to develop meaning from the content they study.

In line with the content dimension, the student demonstrates his or her ability to apply reflection strategies such as afterthought, mirroring, and self-reflection. The incentive dimension focuses on the individual’s ability to participate in the learning process and includes issues such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The interaction dimension pertains to the learners’ contact with the social and physical environment and occurs on two levels: the social level, which is where the interactive situation occurs, and societal, which provides the context of the interaction.

Furthermore, I used Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework as I specifically explored the beliefs of students who have found success in the Spanish acquisition process at an HBCU. This framework is influenced by theories from the disciplines of education, psychology, and sociology and investigate student experiences and performance using an “instead of fashion” (p. 68). The framework, developed during Harper’s National Black Male College Achievement Study (NBMCAS), is the result of his realization that existing literature regarding increasing minority achievement in higher education overwhelmingly centered on minority students’ deficiencies. In contrast, the anti-deficit approach is based on developing and asking questions that are concerned with how
underrepresented minority students achieve success, rather than relying on existing literature and theories that describe their experiences as challenging or inhibiting (Harper, 2012).

In relation to the present study, the combination of Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model and Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework aided in understanding how Spanish language content was successfully acquired by students attending a historically Black institution, taking into consideration their cognitive abilities, motivations, and learning environment. While Illeris’s model emphasizes that learning cannot occur without the intersection of the three dimensions within the context of society (Illeris, 2007), Harper provides a framework for examining these dimensions from the perspective of students who are successfully navigating the Spanish language curriculum at their HBCU. As a result, use of these two frameworks assisted me in filling an important gap in second language acquisition research.

**Purpose of the Study**

Additional research is needed to understand the holistic experiences of Spanish language students while enrolled at an HBCU. Specifically, research must address how these experiences influence their decisions to persist toward degree completion in a Spanish program and achieve proficiency in the language. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning.
Research Questions

In an attempt to understand the roles that content, the individual, and the learning environment play in the Spanish language acquisition process, this study answered three research questions informed by Illeris’ (2002) three dimensions of learning model and Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework. The following research questions examined how the relationships between Illeris’ three dimensions of learning—content, incentive, and interaction—impact the Spanish language acquisition process:

1) What learning experiences and teaching methods do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU perceive to be beneficial to the acquisition process?

2) How do the internal and external motivations of Spanish language learners at an HBCU influence their experiences in the language acquisition process?

3) In what ways do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU interact with the target culture or language?

Significance of the Study

By focusing on the perceptions of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU, this study aimed to shed light on a topic that is currently lacking in the existing body of literature. Although previous studies have attempted to address the topic of minority education in the field of foreign languages, these investigations primarily focus on the impact on and the perceptions of African American students (Brigman & Jacobs, 1981; Clark, 1980; Hubbard, 1968, 1980; Moore & English, 1997, 1998; Wilberschied & Dassier, 1991). They do not consider the experiences of students who learn in a predominantly African American
community but are not African descendants. Despite the fact that African American undergraduate students are the target population of these particular studies, these inquiries occurred exclusively at predominantly White institutions (Anya, 2011; Moore, 2005). As a result, the focus of these studies is the acquisition of language as mainly influenced by the pupil’s racial and ethnic identification, which ignores the possible impact of the institutional culture of a historically Black college or university. These studies tend to focus on the perceptions of students who have chosen not to persist with their language programs or who are dissatisfied with the experience of language study rather than those who find success (Davis & Markham, 1991). In an effort to understand how and why second language learners at HBCUs—specifically in the field of Spanish—persist in their program, an investigation into the factors that lead to student success in Spanish language study is vital.

Discovering the language learning beliefs of these students could provide educators with a chance to understand instructional factors that contribute positively toward the learning of the Spanish language at a historically Black institution as expressed by their students. Additionally, the results of this study could inform the process of teacher education for those individuals whose responsibility it is to prepare Spanish instructors for the HBCU classroom. Furthermore, the findings of this investigation could (a) provide an opportunity for educators and policy makers to reevaluate the needs and compositions of Spanish language programs at HBCUs, (b) supply a foundation for the future exploration of the impact of positive learning environments on student motivation as it pertains to Spanish language learning at HBCUs, and (c) encourage dialogue between educators and students
with regard to the creation of successful programs in additional modern and critical languages at HBCUs.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research**

In the field of second language acquisition, there is a lack of attention to successful learners of foreign languages at historically Black colleges and universities. As a result, the experiences of these students are overlooked and their voices are silenced. In a preliminary attempt to understand the successes experienced by these students, I chose to investigate this phenomenon using an exploratory collective case study approach. In a collective case study—also referred to as a multiple case study—each individual case is considered its own study. The researcher analyzes each case separately and then performs a cross-case analysis in which overarching themes and interpretations from each case are compared with one another (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). In the present study, each student participant was an individual case and subsequently the unit of analysis. Each case was bounded by the student’s enrollment at Winston-Salem State University, a public HBCU in North Carolina. By exploring more than one case, collective case studies offer researchers an opportunity to explore an experience in its actual context from varying perspectives. This approach lends itself to be considered “more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (Yin, 2009, p. 53).

In accordance with the guidelines proposed for a collective case study, I collected data through the use of one-on-one interviews and document analysis (Creswell, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009). I purposively sampled students identified as successful Spanish
language learners from Winston-Salem State University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This method of sampling ensures that the researcher selects cases that will inform the research problem or phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2012). I first analyzed the data by conducting a within-case analysis, in which I identified details specific to each student case. After the transcription of each interview, I reviewed the transcripts multiple times, performed open coding, and identified patterns among the thematic categories that arose. I then used the codes generated from the interviews to analyze data from the documents. Subsequently, I compared the salient patterns from each within-case analysis to conduct a cross-case analysis. In a final step, I summarized my findings by presenting a naturalistic generalization of the cases and provided a description of the lessons learned regarding the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners with regard to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning (Yin, 1981).

**Definition of Terms**

The following is a list of definitions of terms and phrases used throughout the study:

1. American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) – an individual membership organization that creates national standards for communication in foreign languages.

2. Content – the first of Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning; pertains to a learner’s abilities, insights, and understanding in relation to the learning material; signal words include: knowledge, understanding, and skills.
3. Critical languages – less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian/Farsi, Russian, and Turkish

4. Extensive period of time – a period of study of four or more weeks in a Spanish-speaking country or territory that is not part of the 48 contiguous United States, Hawaii, or Alaska.

5. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) – their fundamental mission is to serve the black community through the provision of higher education.

6. Incentive – the second of Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning; refers to the learner’s orientation toward participation in the learning process; signal words include: motivation, emotion, and volition.

7. Interaction – the third of Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning; is associated with the learner’s interaction with the social and material environment in which learning occurs; occurs on the social and societal levels; signal words include: action, communication, and cooperation.

8. Language proficiency – refers to the use of linguistic strategies in an intentional and tailored fashion

9. Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) – include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs); “institutions identified by federal legislation as either established by charter or evolved by student population and focused on serving ethnic
groups that have suffered the historic vestiges of segregation and/or educational deprivation” (Gipp, et al., 2004).

10. National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO) – “founded to provide an international voice for the nation’s HBCUs; to place and maintain the issue of equal opportunity in higher education on the national agenda; to advocate policies, programs, and practices designed to preserve and enhance HBCUs; and to increase the active participation of blacks at every level in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs in American higher education” (Wiley & Glew, 2010, p. 318)

11. Superior – On the ACTFL Oral Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages, a student at the Superior level is able to converse about an assortment of topics in formal and informal situations in Spanish. The speaker can also build their own hypotheses and examine other options. Although errors may arise during the course of dialog, students at this level “demonstrate no pattern of error in the use of basic structures” (ACTFL, 2014, p. 5). The Superior level is second only to the Distinguished level of oral proficiency on the ACTFL scale. Additional ACTFL Proficiency levels include:

a. Distinguished – This level represents the highest demonstration of oral proficiency. Speakers at the Distinguished level “are able to use language skillfully, and with accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness” (p. 4). They are
able to support points of view that are not their own by using persuasive and theoretical language.

b. *Advanced* – students at the *Advanced* level “engage in conversation in a clearly participatory manner in order to communicate information on autobiographical topics, as well as topics of community, national, or international interest.

i. *Advanced High* – Speakers at this level are able to complete all of the *Advanced* level tasks easily and with confidence. However, they cannot maintain performance at the *Superior* level when discussing a number of topics. Although they may formulate their arguments to express their point of view, errors still arise.

ii. *Advanced Mid* – Speakers are able to discuss and describe in the principle time frames of past, present, and future, with the ability to control temporal perspective. They have an extensive vocabulary, but their “discourse may still reflect the oral paragraph structure of their own language rather than that of the target language (p. 6).

iii. *Advanced Low* – Students who perform at the *Advanced Low* level can actively participate in most informal and some formal conversations relating to school, home, pastimes, professions, current events, and issues regarding the community. The responses that they provide, however, rarely are longer than a single paragraph. They may also
employ the use of false cognates, direct translations, and instances of self-correction.

c. Intermediate – At this level, speakers are able to “create with the language when talking about familiar topics related to their daily life” (p. 7). They are able to ask basic questions in order to meet their general needs in a given situation.

i. Intermediate High – A student at this level is able to discuss routine and social situations easily at the Intermediate level. Although though they are able to complete several tasks at the Advanced level, they are unable to consistently maintain this routine.

ii. Intermediate Mid – A student at the Intermediate Mid level is capable of easily and correctly negotiating a vast amount of communicative tasks in addition to being able to discuss topics such as work, school, home, current events, and personal interests. Speakers at the Intermediate Mid level struggle to form associations between ideas and have problems with negotiating time-based transitions.

iii. Intermediate Low – Speakers at this level can converse about a limited number of straightforward social situations regarding such topics as: personal information, daily activities, and purchasing food or clothing items. They often experience challenges when asked directly for information.
d. *Novice* – Students who speak at this proficiency level are only able to converse about predictable daily topics using short messages. They are often difficult to understand by even the most patient listener.

i. *Novice High* – At the *Novice High* level, speakers can complete many of the tasks at the *Intermediate* level, but they are unable to consistently maintain their performance at that level. Their discourse primarily uses the present tense, and their pronunciation is heavily influenced by their native language.

ii. *Novice Mid* – Speakers at this level converse using only a few words at a time, or they provide “memorized phrases limited by the particular context in which the language has been learned” (p. 9).

iii. *Novice Low* – At the *Novice Low* level, speakers have limited ability to communicate in the language and their pronunciation makes their speech difficult to understand. Due to their limited knowledge and control of the language, they are unable to actively contribute to a conversation.

12. Second language acquisition (SLA) – the process of learning a language other than one’s native language; note that in the literature, second language acquisition is often synonymous with the learning of a language other than one’s native language regardless of the number of languages previously acquired by an individual.
13. Successful Spanish language learner – modified from Anya’s (2011) definition of successful second language learners; a student who has studied Spanish as a language other than his or her native language, and meets at least two of the following criteria:

a. he or she has been rated at the level of Superior via the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Assessment of Performance Toward the Proficiency in Languages,

b. he or she studied in a university Spanish-language program at the advanced level of year 3 or above,

c. or he or she has been enrolled in various college-level language courses with the aim of earning a minor in the discipline and/or spending an extensive period of time in another Spanish-speaking country to attain fluency.

14. Title VI – Title VI of the Higher Education Act began as a part of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 to meet the national security needs of the United States following the Sputnik launch (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). The purpose of Title VI is to provide “language area centers for expansion of postsecondary instruction in uncommon languages and related subjects, modern foreign language fellowships, research supporting language learning methodology and specialized teaching materials, and language institutes to provide advanced language training.”
Organization of the Study

Chapter Two is a review of the existing literature as it relates to the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at HBCUs. To situate this topic in the literature, I first present an overview of the current enrollment trends in the Spanish language at American colleges and universities. I will then address the roles HBCUs play in the instruction of minority students in foreign languages. The discussion subsequently moves to current trends in language learning research, the issues that remain unresolved, and how the use of Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model and Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficient model can provide new perspectives in the field—specifically, as it relates to Spanish language instruction at HBCUs.

In Chapter Three, I will focus on my methodological choice of the collective case study approach and will operationalize my data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter Four will present a detailed description of each student case, followed by a presentation of students’ beliefs regarding their successful acquisition of the Spanish language in Chapter Five. Chapter Six will conclude the study by presenting an interpretation of the findings in relation to the conceptual frameworks, implications for area professionals, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The need for persons in governmental, public, and private sectors that speak more than one language is at an all-time high as a result of recent threats to the national security of the United States (Klein & Rice, 2012). At a time when global competition is increasing, diversity in the workplace is in demand, and the minority population is steadily growing, the need for minority linguists is steadily on the rise (Knight, et al., 2012; Leeman, 2006; Marcos & Peyton, 2002; National Research Council, 2007; Pomerantz, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). However, minority students currently study languages at much lower rates than their Caucasian peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). As a result, the United States must call upon those higher education institutions that have a vested interest in educating students from traditionally underserved populations (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; Peters, 1994). However, debates are brewing regarding the legitimacy and relevance of minority serving institutions—particularly, historically Black colleges and universities (Abdul-Alim, 2011; Culpepper, 2010; Devarics, 2011). The ability of HBCUs to heed the nation’s linguistic call may provide leverage in supporting their continued existence among America’s institutions of higher education (Berger, 2010; Ochoa, 2012).

In this chapter, I briefly examine Spanish language enrollment at the collegiate level as it pertains to the requirements for achieving language proficiency and the low enrollment of minority students in foreign languages. Next, I will provide a review of the lenses of language learning research, paying special attention to the following themes: learner beliefs
in second language acquisition research, learner subjectivity and socialization in second
language acquisition, and motivation and self-perception in second language learning. I will
then examine studies comparable to the current investigation in second language acquisition
research and unresolved issues in language learning research.

In the final portion of this chapter, I will discuss the elements present in the process
of learning. One of the conceptual frameworks used for this study is the work by Knud Illeris
(2002). Following an exploration of the meaning of learning, I will discuss each of the two
processes of learning as well as the three dimensions of learning proposed in the framework.
Of particular interest will be how the interplay between the content, incentive, and interaction
dimensions of learning at HBCUs may positively impact the Spanish language acquisition
process. To better understand student success in the process of language acquisition, I will
supplement my analysis using Shaun Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement model.
This model is a framework for examining factors that contribute to positive student
performance as opposed to hindrances that prohibit learning—a traditional lens used in
language learning research regarding minority students.

Individual and Societal Benefits of Bilingualism

Language learning research indicates that there are a variety of individual benefits
associated with the ability to communicate in more than one language (Abu-Rabia, 1999;
individuals have better control of their cognitive activities than people who speak only one
language. This control may be due, in part, to a bilingual individual’s ability to think
abstractly by associating multiple words for a single object or idea (Ben-Zeev, 1977). More specifically, the capacity to utilize these linguistic systems interchangeably through the act of code-switching—altering the use of one language for another—alludes to bilinguals’ propensities to apply this cognitive process within a variety of contexts. As Peal and Lambert (1962) explain:

…bilinguals typically acquire experience in switching from one language to another, possibly trying to solve a problem while thinking in one language, and then when blocked, switching to another. This habit, if it were developed, could help them in their performance on tests requiring symbolic reorganization since they demand a readiness to drop one hypothesis or concept and try another. (p. 14)

Existing research supports this claim and demonstrates that students who are bilingual are also more likely to perform better on standardized tests and in mathematics, reading, and writing than students who are only able to speak one language (Armstrong & Rogers, 1997; Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; Hakuta, 1986; Masciantonio, 1977).

In addition to cognitive benefits, studies show that the ability to communicate in more than one language can be considered a form of cultural capital (Christian, Pufahl & Rhodes, 2005; Hadley, 2000). Cultural capital refers to “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 488). In the present context, bilinguals possess the societally desirable skill of communicating with other individuals through the use of another language. This linguistic skill serves as a form of cultural capital that provides them with opportunities they might
otherwise not encounter. When compared to their monolingual peers, people who are bilingual often experience economic advantages such as increased employment opportunities and higher salaries (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2015; Ezarik, 2001; Weatherford, 1986; Wee, 2003). Specifically, students who are proficient in communicating in additional languages possess a type of cultural capital that can contribute to their success in fields worldwide such as medicine, law, diplomacy, international business, technology, social work, the military, and education (Pomerantz, 2002; Roca, 1999). People who speak more than one language earn, on average, up to $10,000 more per year than their monolingual counterparts (Bagnato, 2005).

Furthermore, research indicates that beyond their ability to verbally communicate with speakers of other languages, bilinguals are much more at ease interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Cziko, Lambert, and Gutter, 1980). A possible factor contributing to this belief is the cultural awareness and sensitivity resulting from these interactions. For example, in an investigation of a Spanish/English immersion program, Kinberg (2001) revealed that children not only embraced the opportunity to converse with their classmates in both languages, but also valued the cultural competence resulting from relationships with people from other ethnic groups. Similarly, learners of additional languages are often more tolerant of the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences they encounter through interactions with other individuals (Carpenter & Torney, 1974).
The ability and willingness of bilinguals to interact with diverse communities also benefits society in general. Within the context of the United States, the rapidly changing demographic makeup of the country calls for more individuals who are able to meet the linguistic needs of the population (Knight, et. al., 2012; Pomerantz, 2002, U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Research suggests that the United States has an increased need for linguistically diverse workers in fields such as business, government, healthcare, technology, and education (Klein & Rice 2012; Ochoa, 2012). These needs include, but are not limited to: interpreter services in health care, bilingual social workers and counselors in schools, and legal translators (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; National Research Council, 2007). By encouraging advanced language study among students irrespective of discipline, higher education institutions increase the likelihood that these needs are met (Hanson, 2003). Additionally, as the United States continues to collaborate and compete within the global community, the need for culturally competent representatives in all sectors in which these interactions occur increases (LoBianco, Liddicoat, & Crozet, 1999; Marcos & Peyton, 2000; National Research Council, 2007). Thus, the cultural competence gained by individuals through the study of additional languages prepares them to handle the dynamics of communicating effectively with members of other international organizations, which potentially contribute to the protection of the nation’s economic and security interests.

**Spanish Language Enrollment at the Collegiate Level**

Research regarding the study of foreign languages in American institutions of higher education demonstrates that the amount of students enrolled in Spanish courses is greater
than the collective enrollment for all other foreign languages (Alonso, 2007; Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010; Welles, 2004). Figure 1 illustrates the results of a 2009 study conducted by the Modern Language Association that determined that 864,986 students who were enrolled in two- and four-year colleges and universities matriculated in Spanish courses (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010). This statistic accounts for 53 percent of the total foreign language enrollment at the collegiate level for that year. The popularity of the Spanish language in American institutions of higher education is most likely reflective of the emergence of Hispanics as the largest ethnic minority population in the United States, perceptions that Spanish is an easier language to learn, and students’ desire to continue the study of the same language they chose in high school (Alonso, 2007; Leeman, 2006; Majeed, 2013; Pomerantz, 2002; Pratt, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Figure 1. Enrollments in Spanish Compared with Those of All Other Languages except Latin and Ancient Greek, by Year
Although many students continue to choose Spanish as a foreign language course of study, the growth rate in which they make this choice is steadily declining. Between 1998 and 2002, the enrollment of students in Spanish courses increased by 13.7 percent (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010). However, the growth rates for enrollment in Spanish increased by only 10.3 percent and 5.1 percent by 2006 and 2009, respectively (p. 3). This decrease in enrollment growth for the Spanish language pales in comparison to the growth rates of other foreign languages during the same time. For example, enrollment in Japanese language courses increased by 10.3 percent, Portuguese enrollment increased by 10.8 percent, American Sign Language enrollment grew by 16.4 percent, Chinese enrollment reached 18.2 percent, enrollment in Korean courses grew by 19.1 percent, and enrollment in Arabic courses skyrocketed to 46.3 percent (p. 3). Research suggests that increased interest in the *critical languages*—less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian/Farsi, Russian, and Turkish—may result from the United States government’s push to produce more individuals capable of communicating in the less commonly studied languages in light of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Committee for Economic Development, 2006).

In addition to the modest growth rates for the Spanish language, research shows that students enroll in upper-level Spanish courses less frequently than lower-level courses (Howard, 2007). Many of these students ultimately decide not to enroll in Spanish courses after the second year of language study (Alonso, 2007; Garfinkel, 1987; Simon, 1980; Speiller, 1988). More specifically, in the United States, the ratio between student enrollment
in lower-level Spanish courses compared to upper-level courses is 5:1 (Howard, 2007). This statistic supports research that suggests once students enroll in college, the majority will end their language studies after the second year, causing them to receive approximately 180 hours of exposure to the language (Alonso, 2007; Garfinkel, 1987; Simon, 1980; Speiller, 1988). Unfortunately, this amount of contact hours is well below the suggested 1,320 hours needed to attain proficiency (Malone, Rifkin, Christian, & Johnson, 2005). By deciding not to continue the study of Spanish after the second year, many students may prohibit themselves from reaching the level of language proficiency.

**Low Enrollment of Minority Students in Foreign Languages**

On average, in American institutions of higher education, minority students are less likely to study foreign languages than their white colleagues (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). For example, research suggests that African American students continue to exhibit low enrollment in the advanced language courses (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; Peters, 1994). In fact, the most recent statistics on language study among this population indicate that of the 191,180 African American students who earned bachelor’s degrees during the 2012-2013 academic year, only 964 of these students graduated from foreign language programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This means that only 0.6% of bachelor’s degrees awarded to African American students were in the field of foreign languages. This fact also indicates that of the total 21,673 foreign language degrees conferred by American institutions of higher education in 2012-2013, foreign language degrees awarded to African American students equated to only 4.4% of this figure.
Hispanic and American Indian students are also less inclined to study foreign languages at the collegiate level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). One contributing factor may be the limited exposure to foreign language study that minority students receive in the public school systems (Pelavin & Klane, 1990; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990). An investigation by the Committee for Economic Development (2006) found that in 2003, approximately 29 percent of principals of schools located in districts densely populated by minorities expected additional reductions in the amount of time allotted to the instruction of foreign languages. Moreover, researchers found that minority students are often deterred from studying languages other than English in the United States (Tedick, Walker, Lange, Paige, & Jorstad, 1993). In Moore’s (2005) study of 128 African-American students who attended the University of Texas at Austin, students revealed that many of their high school counselors discouraged them from taking foreign language courses. Counselors instead suggested that students enroll in “something practical” or “within [the student’s] ability, like social work or nursing” (p. 195).

Existing research also attributes the low minority enrollment trend to the lack of minority representation in the role of foreign language faculty, the omission of ethnocentric perspectives such as the African diaspora from language instruction, and minority students’ ideas that language study is limited to Caucasians (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; Peters, 1994). Similarly, Clark (1980) found that, “black students in elementary language courses often show indifference toward the cultural context of textbooks that do not seem to be attractive or relevant to them” (p. 23). Research suggests that this lack of interest
is associated with students’ desire to study languages and literatures that are similar to their own cultural experiences (Clowney & Legge, 1979). Examples of such culturally inclusive topics include: the Garífuna peoples of Honduras; the religions of santería in Cuba and Puerto Rico as well as voodoo in the Dominican Republic; and multicultural influences in musical genres like tango, merengue, salsa, and samba (Rogers, 2006).

Likewise, Heritage language learners—defined as an individual who “learned their language as their home language (L1), or who have some form of family or ‘heritage’ connection to the language” (Cummins, 2005, p. 586)—also experience challenges in American foreign language classrooms. Heritage learners often feel alienated by language instructors’ preferences for one way of speaking the target language over another (Pérez-Leroux & Glass, 2000). All known languages in the world demonstrate some manner of variation in dialect (p. 58). However, instructors who have a bias toward one dialect over another may overlook the linguistic needs of many heritage speakers of the target language (Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Villa & Villa, 1998). Furthermore, these decisions may challenge the linguistic knowledge of a heritage language learner by incorrectly modifying an otherwise acceptable dialect for the sake of conforming to another (Pérez-Leroux & Glass, 2000).

The current disproportion of minority foreign language graduates to their white counterparts is cause for alarm. As a result of this divide in advanced language instruction, minority students may be less inclined to secure the cognitive and economic benefits resulting from proficiency in another language. Furthermore, this disparity may prohibit
society from experiencing the positive impact of a linguistically diverse and proficient citizenry. Foreign language faculty members and administrators at American institutions must reevaluate the decisions they make regarding curriculum planning and implementation. In their current state, the curriculum, structure, and social climate of many of these programs detract minority students from developing the language proficiency they need to succeed in today’s globalized world. Guillaume (1994) accurately encourages faculty member and administrators to address this pertinent issue when he states that, “if we are to attract minorities to study languages, we must also teach languages as the domain of all peoples who speak them and not as the exclusive property of majority groups” (p. 66).

**HBCUs and the Instruction of Minority Linguists**

Following the American Civil War, more than 200 historically Black colleges and universities were founded before 1890 in response to the government’s requirement that Southern states adhere to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments (Brown, 2013). Per the Higher Education Act of 1965, a historically Black college or university is defined as any institution of higher education that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation (USDOE, 2012, para. 1).
These institutions primarily received financial support from charity organizations, religious groups, community sponsors, private philanthropists, and state governments in order to provide education to black Americans and recently freed slaves (Brown, 2013; Knight, et al., 2012). In fact, many segregated states founded public HBCUs separate from traditionally white land grant institutions in order to receive federal aid provided by the Morrill Act of 1890, which assigned specific funds to schools that educated black Americans (Brown, 2013). Nevertheless, HBCUs received considerably less funds than predominantly white institutions (PWIs)—a trend which continues today despite increased enrollments (Brown, 2013).

The literature on the underfunding of HBCUs also alludes to the desire of many policymakers to withdraw funding from HBCUs in its entirety in order to combine them with non-black institutions (Abdul-Alim, 2011; Devarics, 2011). Several congresspersons cite that HBCUs provide programs that result in “duplicative, inefficient, and wasteful spending” and are therefore no longer serve a purpose in the American higher education system (Culpepper, 2010; Devarics, 2011). Yet many of their efforts have been disputed as a result of a renewed interest in the relevance of HBCUs by lawmakers at all levels of government.

**White House Initiative of 2010 on the Relevancy of HBCUs**

Following the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the relaxation of admissions policies for public institutions of higher education, many lawmakers and private citizens adopted the opinion that HBCUs no longer served a purpose in the American higher education system (Garibaldi, Dawson, & English, in Lindsay & Justiz, 2001). Critics often
cite low enrollments, in addition to fiscal and legal issues as justification for their closure (Abdul-Alim, 2011; Devarics, 2011). Still, these schools continue to demonstrate their commitment to servicing the African American community and other traditionally underserved populations (Mixon et al., 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; St. John, 1998; St. John & Hossler, 1998). As Kingslow (1989) found in her investigation of HBCUs’ roles in the development of rural areas, these institutions “have a vested interest in the African American community and other disadvantaged groups that mainstream institutions have failed to serve” (p. 6). It is this commitment, coupled with existing opposition to the existence of HBCUs, that inspired the development of the White House Initiative of 2010 on the Relevancy of HBCUs.

On February 26, 2010, President Barack Obama signed an executive order renewing the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (The White House, 2010). This order stressed that HBCUs “continue to be important engines of economic growth and community service, and they are proven ladders of intergenerational advancement for men and women of all ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds, especially African Americans” (Section 1). Research shows that despite the fact that HBCUs make up only 3 percent of American colleges and universities, they educate nearly 30 percent of all black undergraduates (Berger, as cited in Wiley & Glew, 2010). Furthermore, these institutions graduate 75 percent more black students than other colleges and universities (Knight, et al., 2012). Studies also demonstrate that HBCUs accept 42 percent of students from all racial and ethnic groups who come from low-income households and admit students
who earn scores 20 percent lower on the SAT than do most traditional institutions (Mann, 2011; Reid, 2011). Since HBCUs do not discriminate with regard to the admissions process, anyone who meets the designated criteria can be admitted, which has resulted in a considerable increase in the Asian, Hispanic, international, and Caucasian student population (Apart No More, 2010). President Bill Clinton also acknowledged the irreplaceable role of HBCUs in his 1999 Proclamation 7225 of National Historically Black Colleges and Universities Week. He shares that

> While our society has changed in the intervening decades, the need for these institutions has not. Our Nation’s HBCUs have assisted African Americans and other students from low income communities in achieving their educational goals and reaching their full potential, while keeping tuition costs affordable (p. 106).

The White House Initiative also addresses the need to work with governmental, public, and private organizations to improve the “identity, visibility, and distinctive capabilities and overall competitiveness of HBCUs” for the purpose of providing more students the best education possible (The White House, 2010). However, as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan states

> The President’s…goal can only be attained if an unprecedented number of Americans enroll in and complete college…and that means that student populations with high dropout rates, especially minority students, will have to exponentially increase their college graduation rates…HBCUs will—and must—play a critical leadership role in meeting this challenge (Duncan, 2010)
As Duncan suggests, it is up to HBCUs to utilize their reputation for educating underrepresented populations in order to lead American colleges and universities in the graduation of more minority students. One factor that may impact the competitiveness of HBCUs and help fulfill the goals of this Initiative is the commitment to the internationalization of HBCU campuses and curricula.

Title VI, NAFEO, and the Internationalization of HBCUs

Title VI of the Higher Education Act originated as a component of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 in an attempt to meet the national security needs of the United States following the Sputnik launch (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). According to the OPE, the principle purpose of Title VI is to provide “language area centers for expansion of postsecondary instruction in uncommon languages and related subjects, modern foreign language fellowships, research supporting language learning methodology and specialized teaching materials, and language institutes to provide advanced language training.” For more than thirty years, HBCUs have received Title VI grants to develop and enhance international and foreign language programs (Berger, 2010). In 2011, more than half of the Title VI National Resource Centers offered assistance to historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic serving institutions, and community colleges (Ochoa, 2012). These grants supported the development of international programs such as Howard University’s National Resource Center in African Language and Area Studies as well as Clark Atlanta University’s Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad to various nations in Africa and Latin America (Berger, 2010). Additionally, the Institute for International Public Policy—a Title
VI program—is the only Title VI program explicitly developed for the purpose of aiding HBCUs in increasing the amount of minority students who engage in international study (p. 318).

In an attempt to assess the foreign language, international programs, and study abroad programs provided by HBCUs, in 2005 the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO) surveyed the 120 historically Black colleges and universities that fall under its jurisdiction. Among the 53 institutions that responded to the survey, a total of 62% indicated that their institutional missions included the goal of internationalization (p. 321). The findings suggest that many of the NAFEO member institutions continue to embrace the organization’s commitment to internationalization and the improvement of foreign language education that it has had since its establishment in 1969.

**HBCUs as Proponents of Minority Linguistic Instruction**

The instruction of foreign languages at colleges and universities has been a long-standing tradition (Perkin, 1997). Its purpose began with the need for students to accurately read ancient texts and converse in the language of the elite. In the early institutions of higher education in the United States, particular interest was dedicated to the instruction of Latin and Greek (Snow, 1907). Shortly following the completion of World War I, the teaching of the ancient languages was championed as a way in which students could become leaders in the current society while retaining a connection with traditions of the past. As stated by Charles M. Purin, a Professor of German at Milwaukee State Normal School, these teachings “[confer] a citizenship with the world and a citizenship with the ages” (Purin, 1920, p. 326).
This perspective was also reflected in the curricula of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) upon their establishments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Liberal arts studies were emphasized by the missionary founders of these institutions due to their belief in the development of “well-trained black leadership” (Anderson, 1997). Records indicate that as early as the late nineteenth century, HBCUs founded by Black religious organizations and missionary philanthropies emphasized the instruction of languages, such as Latin and Greek, for the purpose of cultivating students capable of assuming roles of leadership in the New South (UNCF, 2005). For this reason, the study of modern languages such as French and German was stressed, in addition to the teaching of the ancient languages, Latin and Greek.

Similar to most historically Black colleges and universities founded by religious groups and missionary philanthropies in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, the first language programs at many of these institutions modeled the “classical liberal curriculum” of the colleges and academies of New England from 1780-1860 as proposed by the Yale Report (Anderson, 1997; Church & Sedlak, 1997). The adoption of this philosophy led to the heavy emphasis on the instruction of Latin and Greek. Some research emphasizes that as early as 1933, the most common languages instructed at HBCUs were French, German, Spanish, and Italian (Rivers, 1933).

Although various institutions adopted this philosophy of instruction, the education of African Americans in the ancient and classical languages was opposed by critics such as: William H. Baldwin, Jr., industrial philanthropist; Edwin A. Alderman, president of the
University of North Carolina; and Charles Dabney, chemistry professor at the University of North Carolina and president of the University of Cincinnati (Anderson, 1988; 1997).

According to Dabney, the teaching of foreign languages at any Black institution was against reason. He expressed,

We must use common sense in the education of the negro…We must recognize in all its relations that momentous fact that the negro is a child race, at least two thousand years behind the Anglo-Saxon in its development…Nothing is more ridiculous than the programme of the good religious people from the North who insist upon teaching Latin, Greek, and philosophy to the negro boys who come to their schools. (p. 1021)

Despite these and similar dissenting voices, the perpetuation of language instruction at historically Black institutions can be seen in the various foreign language requirements for graduation supported by an overwhelming majority of HBCUs over the last century (Rivers, 1933; Stetar, 1997). For example, nearly 95 percent of all historically Black colleges and universities currently have a foreign language graduation requirement for all undergraduate students while the national average for such a requirement is only 53 percent of institutions of higher education (UNCF, 2005).

**Challenges of Language Instruction at HBCUs**

Although HBCUs continue to demonstrate a commitment to foreign language education and campus internationalization, some factors prohibit their growth and threaten their continued existence. In 2009, the NAFEO assessed 53 HBCUs and other predominantly Black institutions and found that many allocate institutional resources to financial aid and
student retention efforts, since they primarily educate mostly low-income and first-generation students (NAFEO, 2010). Additionally, few foreign language programs at HBCUs receive grants or other funding to advance their area or international studies programs (Berger, 2010).

Another factor that may negatively contribute to foreign language instruction at HBCUs is the inability to hire and maintain qualified foreign language teachers and staff (NAFEO, 2010). Similarly, the NAFEO survey reveals that the primary issue faced by foreign language programs at HBCUs is staffing (NAFEO, 2010). Despite the fact that more than 50 percent of the colleges and universities acknowledged the goal of internationalization in their missions, only 28 percent of these schools confirmed the receipt of federal funding to improve and expand their programs (Berger, 2010). Some research indicates that faculty members have the greatest impact on students’ overall academic experience (Allen, 1992; Cox, 2010; Davis, 1992; Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, & Young, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, in an investigation of the experiences of minority college students, low-performing black students indicated that limited faculty contact was a factor that prohibited them from succeeding academically (Allen, 1992). As such, strains placed on funding for foreign language programs and faculty retention may continue to challenge HBCUs as they compete with predominantly white institutions to become leaders in the graduation of globally competent minority students.
Student-Faculty Interaction and Student Success at HBCUs

HBCUs have a history of overcoming financial shortcomings in order to provide a high-quality education to America’s underrepresented populations (Mixon et al., 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; St. John, 1998; St. John & Hossler, 1998). It is this commitment to the education of students who are traditionally underrepresented at predominantly white institutions that supports their legitimacy as members of the American higher education system in the 21st century (Apart No More, 2010; Clark, 2009; Mann, 2011; Nealy, 2009; Reid, 2011; The White House, 2010). Research suggests that as a result of minority students’ increased interest in college attendance and national initiatives regarding internationalized educations, HBCUs must remain at the forefront of the movement (Berger, 2010). One factor that may contribute to the success of minority foreign language students is the institutional context of the HBCU (Cox, 2010; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Fleming, 2001; Laird, et al., 2004).

Some research findings allude to the fact that minority students perform better academically when they receive support from others (Cox, 2010; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987). For instance, research emphasizes that Latino students exhibit higher retention rates when they have frequent and meaningful contact with their instructors (Hernandez, 2000). In a study of the effect of formal versus informal social integration on over 1,200 students, Mayo, Murgaia and Padilla (1995) determined that black students maintain higher grade point averages when they collaborate with their instructors outside of class.
The literature on foreign language learning also suggests that the diversity of faculty members is critical with regard to the quality of the interactions between instructors and students (Cox, 2010; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

…women and faculty of color are more likely to use student-centered approaches and active learning methods in the classroom, to include the perspectives of racial and ethnic minorities in the curriculum, and to be more actively engaged in conducting research on issues of race and gender. (p. 51)

Since students who attend HBCUs are more inclined to encounter faculty members who share similar ethnic and racial backgrounds, these interactions occur more frequently and place foreign language programs at HBCUs in a unique position to positively impact the international education of a substantial number of minority students (Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, & Young, 2005).

The Lenses of Language Learning Research

Learner Beliefs in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Research

Most recent discussions regarding second language acquisition focus primarily on language learner beliefs and the success experienced by second language learners. These studies situate themselves in three main categories: the language learning beliefs of students studying French, Spanish, German, and Japanese as foreign languages (Lassiter, 2003; Mori, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; White, 1999, 2008); the language learning beliefs of groups of learners (Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1997; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007; Tumposky, 1991), and the study of English as a Second Language (Bernat, 2006; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Peacock, 2001;
Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Yang, 1999). By understanding the beliefs of language learners, researchers and educators could gauge learners’ orientations toward the acquisition process, which can aid in the development and improvement of language curricula and programs.

Commonalities in language learning exist across language boundaries. As a result, studies that abound in the field of language learning research are representative of multiple language-learning groups (Lassiter, 2003; Mori, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; White, 1999, 2008). In a study investigating the effects of beliefs about learning on students’ acquisition of Japanese, researchers determined that students’ beliefs fell into two categories—epistemological beliefs and beliefs about language learning (Mori, 1999). Students’ epistemological beliefs highlighted their opinions regarding learning in general and included: quickness in learning, the simplicity and ambiguity of knowledge, and dependency on educational authorities (p. 389). Students’ beliefs regarding learning the Japanese language included: the labor of learning kanji, processes in interpreting unique kanji words, and risk-taking in communicating in a foreign language (p. 392). Findings from this study indicate that students’ beliefs about learning language are specific to the tasks they are required to complete and therefore are independent of their beliefs about learning in general.

Similarly, White (1999) conducted a longitudinal study investigating the initial and subsequent shifts in students’ expectations of their self-instruction of Spanish and Japanese. She found that students across these language-learning groups shared comparable qualities in their perceptions of language study. Namely, during the process of language acquisition, these students demonstrated a shift from believing outside factors controlled their level of
language learning success to recognizing their own ability in shaping the success they experienced in their studies.

The beliefs of groups of learners constitute an additional area of focus in language learning research (Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1997; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007; Tumposky, 1991). A prominent theme emerging from research regarding language-learning groups is that there are no identifiable language learning beliefs that are specific to certain cultural groups that can be consistently applied (Horwitz, 1988). Rather, a better observation identifies the presence of variations in language learning beliefs within cultural groups. The current research suggests that the identities and motivations of individual learners cause them to differentiate themselves from other language learners in their cultural groups. Additionally, these within-group variations are affected by the context in which the language learning occurs, such as the educational environment and methods of instruction (p. 575).

Several studies have also explored the beliefs of students studying English as a foreign language. These studies primarily investigate the beliefs regarding acquisition and success of students studying English in their countries of origin (Peacock, 2001; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Yang, 1999) and students learning English while residing in English-speaking countries (Bernat, 2006; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Wenden, 1987). Similar to investigations regarding the study of other world languages, English language learners demonstrated shared beliefs regarding the epistemology of language learning. Of these beliefs prominent themes include: the role of the instructor in the language learning process; the importance of prompt and constant feedback; and the changing roles and responsibilities of the language learner.
(Cotterall, 1995). Interestingly, students recognized that their opinions and perceptions of the language learning process had the power to enhance or inhibit the success that they experienced. Many English learners also identified that their success in learning English heavily depended on their effort, practice, and responsibility in finding opportunities to use the language as opposed to relying on the instructor as their external locus of control (Cotterall, 1999).

**Learner Subjectivity and Socialization in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

Studies pertaining to second language acquisition often investigate this topic using the lenses of learner diversity and identity, in addition to learner motivation and its implications on the language learning process. The literature often looks to the work of British feminist poststructuralist Christine Weedon regarding her perspectives on language and the role of learner subjectivity. Weedon (1996) states,

> Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of selves, our subjectivity, is constructed. (p. 21)

According to this assumption, language has the ability to shape the way we view ourselves in the context of the learning environment and the target language community.

Other studies in this field identified that second language learning can be a form of language socialization (Ochs, 2002; Poole, 1992; Rymes, 1997). Language socialization is defined as the process by which “children and other novices apprehend and enact the ‘context of situation’ in relation to the ‘context of culture’” (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001, p. 1). In this
setting, second language learners demonstrate a number of shared characteristics in their efforts to associate their language learning knowledge, experiences, and journeys with the target culture. Some of these qualities include: having socially defined roles that qualify novice learners as particular kinds of members in the target culture; and the ability to be an expert regarding certain content or knowledge while remaining a novice in other areas. Furthermore, these studies suggest that second language learners must frequently negotiate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, identities and cultural allegiances (p. 17).

**Motivation and Self-perception in Second Language Learning**

Existing literature makes several assumptions regarding students’ decisions to study foreign languages (Dörnyei 2003, 2005, 2009; Gardner, 1985, 2001; Gass & Selinker, 2001). In 2001, Gass and Selinker found that learner success in the foreign languages is a function of individual skill and motivation. Additionally, research suggests that student motivation in the learning of foreign languages is fueled by the academic, social, political, and material rewards of second language proficiency (Gardner, 1985, 2001). Furthermore, some researchers believe that student motivation with regard to foreign language study is influenced heavily by students’ perceptions of their future selves as the optimal second language user (Dörnyei, 2003, 2005, 2009).

Research also indicates that the language learner’s environment also has the potential to influence the learner’s motivation (McGroarty, 2001). In 2003, Noels, Pelletier, Clement, and Vellerand found that students reported fewer instances of language motivation when they perceived themselves to be in an environment in which their language instructors offered
them limited freedom of choice in the learning process or did not exhibit high expectations of student competence. Furthermore, Dornyëi (2003) expands on the idea of the environmental impact on language acquisition by examining the motivational concept of *willingness to communicate*. In this context, environmental influences such as existing attitudes within the target language group, social climate, and social and situational boundaries, impact a learner’s readiness and motivation to communicate in the target language with other target-language speakers.

Language learning research is approaching a deeper understanding of language learner motivation with the emergence of multiple theories regarding this subject. Therefore, an investigation into the factors that contribute to student success in language programs will add to the understanding of how students are able to persist in such programs. Additionally, this could greatly inform the current discussion regarding student motivation in foreign language learning.

**Comparable Studies in Second Language Acquisition Literature**

Of the studies that exist in the current body of second language acquisition research, very few attempted to look at the intersection of culture, identity and motivation, experiences, environment, and success in Spanish language acquisition (Anya, 2011; Manzanares, 2006; Manzanares & Murphy, 2010; Poza, 2013). These studies contributed a number of important perspectives that were lacking in the language learning literature. For example, Anya identified that there are very few studies in second language acquisition literature that center on the experiences of African American language learners. Additionally,
among the limited studies that do exist, their primary focus is on the general discussion of low interest, enrollment, and achievement of Black students in this field. These studies also principally address why Black students elect not to participate in the advanced levels of formal language study. In response to this gap in the literature, Anya (2011) conducted a study that investigated the experiences and motivations of Black students who do and do not reach advanced-level second language acquisition. She found that among the study participants, successful black college second language learners experienced encouragement, inclusion, and feelings of self-worth with their peers and instructors during the process of second language study (p. 457). These students were also exposed to different languages at very young ages and received encouragement—or sometimes pressure—from family, which motivated them to learn an additional language. An additional motivation in these students was the integration of Afrocentric themes into the curriculum that reflected the students’ ethnic identities (p. 459).

Similarly, Manzanaresis and Murphy (2010) expanded on a 2006 study and investigated the language learning beliefs of self-identified successful learners of Spanish at a Canadian university. This study is an attempt to understand why students harbor certain perceptions about language learning and how these beliefs relate to one another. They found that among self-identified successful learners, those who practiced communicating in the target language with native Spanish speakers often attributed their success in becoming proficient in the language to their connections and relationships with these individuals. This study is important in language learning research because most studies regarding successful
learners of language select participants using grades alone. On the contrary, Manzanares and Murphy allowed participants to self-identify as successful Spanish learners using criteria such as acknowledgement by peers, satisfaction, effort, and self-perceptions of high motivation (p. 78).

Perhaps the most comprehensive investigation is that of Poza (2013) regarding the beliefs of African American students about foreign language learning. In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, Poza interviewed 114 students enrolled in 8 sections of elementary Spanish courses at an HBCU using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI 2.0) developed by Horwitz (1985, 2013). This instrument consists of 43 items that measure student beliefs about language learning (p. 68). Poza’s study attempted to understand the general beliefs African American students have regarding foreign language study and how these beliefs influence students’ decisions to continue the study of a foreign language after completing the university language requirement for graduation. The researcher found that students demonstrated instrumental motivation by acknowledging the professional importance of communicating in a foreign language. Furthermore, she found that overall, students who intended to study Spanish beyond the level required for graduation were more secure in their communicative proficiency and more invested in learning about Spanish speaking cultures.

**Unresolved Issues in Language Learning Research**

Despite the strides made in language learning research over the past century, there are several important matters that remain to be addressed—particularly as they pertain to
language acquisition at historically Black colleges and universities. The limited amount of studies that exist in the current literature investigate the following topics—often individually: the inclusion of Afrocentric material in language curriculum (Davis & Markham, 1991; English, 1996; Farfan-Cobb & Lassiter, 2003; Hubbard, 1980; Moore, 1998); the low employment of black foreign language instructors (Guillaume, 1994; Wilberschield & Dassier, 1995); and the study of foreign languages prior to attending college (Brigman & Jacobs, 1981; Campbell-Whatley & Comer, 2000; Glynn, 2007; Hines & Jenkins, 2004; Hubbard, 1980; Moore, 1998, 2005). Additionally, these studies primarily investigate the experiences of persons of African descent at HBCUs. Unfortunately, the omission of perspectives from persons who do not identify as black paints an inaccurate picture of the increasingly diverse demographics of the HBCU campus (Apart No More, 2010; Clark, 2009; Mann, 2011; Nealy, 2009; Reid, 2011; White House, 2010).

Although Anya (2011), Manzanaresis and Murphy (2010), and Poza (2013) made commendable attempts to address the issues that are present in language acquisition among a variety of groups of interest, their studies lacked several components that are necessary to gain an understanding of successful language acquisition at an HBCU. For example, Anya’s study only investigated the experiences of students of African ancestry. The benefit of allowing students to identify as African descendants was the inclusion of students who did not solely identify as African American. Nevertheless, the students who participated in this study attended predominantly White institutions and therefore, did not experience the language acquisition process within the context of an HBCU. Additionally, Anya’s study
incorporated multiple—and sometimes conflicting—conceptual frameworks in an effort to address the phenomenon. This amalgamation of frameworks resulted from the need to explain learners’ identities, learning context, motivation, and investment in the second language learning process.

Likewise, Manzanaresis and Murphy (2010) made a substantial contribution to the field of second language research; however, her study overlooked a critical factor. Participants’ self-identification as successful language learners of Spanish is problematic. Manzanaresis defined success as,

…relating to factors such as: peer recognition or recognition by others (family, teachers…); perceived success in language learning, perceived high motivation, effort, enjoyment, or satisfaction in relation to learning Spanish or other languages, or any other factors participants considered related to their success as learners of Spanish. (p. 66)

Self-identification in this study was voluntary and entirely subjective, and the lack of criteria in sampling provided an opportunity for participant bias and the incorporation of perspectives from students who may have falsified or misinterpreted levels of success in the acquisition process.

Despite the relevance of Poza’s (2013) contribution to the literature with respect to the experiences and beliefs of Spanish language learners at HBCUs, this study also overlooks some critical elements. For example, although the researcher desired to comprehend how students’ beliefs affect their intentions to study Spanish beyond the university’s graduation
requirement, she choose to evaluate only students enrolled in elementary Spanish courses. Therefore, any responses she received to items regarding this research question were purely speculation. It might have been more beneficial to also survey students enrolled in courses beyond the graduation requirement with respect to how their beliefs impacted their decision to continue Spanish studies. Furthermore, the sole use of the BALLI 2.0 quantitative survey as the only method of data collection may have prohibited students from thoroughly describing their beliefs regarding language learning. Perhaps Poza could have incorporated a qualitative open-ended response section on the survey that allows students to explain, in detail, further information related to a particular topic of interest. Due to the nature of the study’s purpose, the use of open-ended questions would allow the researcher to explore a range of possible answers rather than limiting students’ responses to those presented on the instrument (Krathwohl, 2009).

Together, these studies offer informative perspectives on students’ beliefs of success, membership in minority groups, the language-learning environment and the collective influence of these factors on the Spanish language acquisition process. However, they fail to address the unique combination of the beliefs of successful students regarding the content they study, their perspectives as language students, and the influence the HBCU environment has on this process. Therefore, the present study used Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model due to its usefulness in accounting for the influence of language curriculum content, student identities and incentives, and the HBCU environment on students’ successful acquisition of the Spanish language.
Three Dimensions of Learning as a Conceptual Framework

The present study used as a conceptual framework a three-dimensional model of learning developed by Knud Illeris (2002), originating from non-behaviorist American, British, European, Continental, Nordic, and Russian theories regarding learning. The three dimensions Illeris associates with the learning process include: content, incentive, and interaction (see Figure 2). Illeris also refers to these dimensions as the cognitive, emotional, and social-societal dimensions (Illeris, 2003). Although these dimensions can exist in varying degrees at different times in the learning process, they are interdependent of one another and all occur within the societal context. This societal context often influences the learning opportunities available to the learner (Illeris, 2007). Per Illeris,

…there are different types of learning that are widely different in scope and that the whole field must always be in the picture, and that one, for example, cannot understand cognitive-professional content learning without also considering what happens in the emotional and social-societal dimensions. (p. 172)
What is Learning?

Before delving into the various dimensions of learning in Illeris’s model, one must first examine the concept of learning. According to Illeris (2003a), learning pertains to “all the processes leading to permanent capacity change, whether it be physical, cognitive, emotional or social in nature, and which do not exclusively have to do with biological maturation” (p. 359). As such, there are four types of learning: cumulative, assimilative, accommodative, and transformative. Regardless of type, all learning incorporates two process and three dimensions (Illeris, 2003a, 2004)
Cumulative learning is also referred to as mechanical learning and deals with that which one learns in an isolated incidence (Illeris, 2003a). This type of learning does not require the existence of prior knowledge about a subject and usually occurs during the early stages of life. Nevertheless, this type of learning can also happen when an individual does not need an understanding of prior information to gain new information—such as remembering an email address or password to a website. Assimilative learning relates to adding new knowledge to preexisting knowledge and is the most commonly occurring type of learning (Piaget, 1952). According to Illeris, “but assimilative learning also takes place in all contexts where one gradually develops one’s capacities of a cognitive, emotional or social-societal nature” (p. 361). The next sections examine each process and dimension of learning in detail.

The third classification of learning is accommodative learning. Accommodative learning, or transcendent learning, refers to the process of deconstruction preexisting mental models and recreating them as a result of the introduction of a new stimulus. For the learner, the accommodative learning process may be challenging; however, the information learned from this style of learning is usually applicable to a variety of contexts thereafter. The final style of learning is transformative learning. Transformative learning is an epistemological adjustment to one’s way of viewing the world as a result of a disorienting experience or the need to assume new roles (Mezirow, 1991). Illeris argues that transformative learning relates closely to changes in one’s personality and requires the reorganization of the cognitive, emotional, and social-societal dimensions of learning (2003a). The stimulus for transformative learning is often an unavoidable life obstacle that must be overcome in order
to progress. Therefore, persons who overcome transformative learning opportunities frequently experience feelings of liberation (p. 361).

**External and Internal Learning Processes**

Illeris’s conceptual framework acknowledges that learning utilizes two processes: an external interaction process and an internal psychological process (Illeris, 2003a, 2004, Richie, 2007). In order for learning to occur, both processes must be operational. The external interaction process results from the contact between the student and his or her environment—such as the social, cultural, and material (Illeris, 2003a). This process is dependent upon environmental factors such as time and place (Illeris, 2007). On the other hand, the internal psychological process—also referred to as the acquisition process—deals with the method by which new information is added to preexisting knowledge. In Illeris’s model, the interaction process is depicted as a vertical line with an arrow at each end—one pointing to the environment located at the bottom of the figure and the individual at the top. Illeris places the environment at the bottom of the model to signify that it is the general foundation, in which the overall learning process occurs and situates the individual learner at the top of the model to indicate his or her role as the case of interest (p. 23) Illeris’s model depicts the acquisition process as a horizontal line with two arrows located above the interaction line. The arrows related to this process point toward the content and incentive dimensions to demonstrate that the process of acquisition incorporates these two dimensions in varying degrees.
Content Dimension of Learning

In learning research, the content dimension traditionally pertains to what we learn and is also referred to as the cognitive dimension. Illeris (2002) identifies knowledge, understanding, and skills as signal words for this dimension. It is through the incorporation of these three components that learners make meaning of the content with which they are presented. A learner achieves success when he or she is able to apply the information learned in a variety of contexts. However, Illeris stresses that the content dimension of learning encompasses a deeper meaning than the superficial characteristics of knowledge and skills that are traditionally ascribed to it (Illeris, 2007). Through his research, he found that “the impact of the words understanding, insight, opinion, overview or anything similar” is consistently absent (p. 52). In response to this omission, he emphasizes the importance of transformative learning, reflection and meta-learning, and reflexivity in an attempt to provide a more comprehensive description of the content dimension.

Language learning research is inundated with elements of the content dimension of learning as prescribed by Illeris. For instance, the concept of meaning perspectives is closely associated with the idea that language learners often bring with them preconceived ideas about the ease of learning a language and impressions regarding the associated cultures (Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011). Meaning perspectives are considered ways of thinking developed during the formative years of childhood and adolescence that are utilized to understand the world in which an individual operates. With regard to language learners, these meaning perspectives have the potential to positively or negative shape the
way in which learners approach language acquisition (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005).

Similar to learning research trends, much of the literature on learning research centers primarily on the content dimension of learning and ignores the other two dimensions. For example, in Castro and Peck’s (2008) study of students enrolled in Spanish classes at a major American university using the Kolb Learning Styles Inventory, they found that students learning styles were capable of positively or negatively impacting their academic achievement in the foreign language classroom. However, this study and many others do not account for the influence that the incentive and interaction dimensions may have on achievement in conjunction with students’ learning styles.

**Incentive dimension of learning**

The second dimension of learning in Illeris’ model is the incentive dimension, which refers to motivation, emotion, and volition. This dimension focuses on the influences on an individual’s ability and decision to participate in the learning process. Illeris (2002) describes motivations in two categories: internal and external. Internal motivations toward learning pertain to the learner’s familial relations, career goals, self-interests, self-efficacy or confidence in oneself, and self-actualization. External motivations may also be associated with familial relationships and a learner’s profession, among other factors. However, in this case, the influence on an individual to learn stems directly from these sources. For example, a language student may be internally motivated to learn the Spanish language to better understand and connect with her Panamanian past. She may also approach the study of
Spanish from a conative mindset and endeavor to learn the language for the sake of learning (Snow, 1989). Furthermore, she may also be externally motivated to learn Spanish by her predominantly Spanish-speaking grandmother who suggests that she has become *Americanized* and is no longer in touch with her roots. Therefore, learning results from the individual’s desire to acquire new knowledge and understanding in relation to how this acquisition may benefit them. In the case of language learners, the initial decision to study a language and the continued commitment to attain proficiency are often motivated by varying degrees of desire and necessity.

Noels (2001) identifies four types of motivation: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, integrative motivation, and instrumental motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the student’s interest in learning a language, while extrinsic motivation deals with external reasons as opposed to an individual’s interest. Integrative motivation speaks to the student’s desire to be able to communicate with speakers of the target language. Instrumental motivation pertains to a compulsory need to learn another language as a result of an external situation or event. Although each of these motivational forces impact a student’s inclination to pursue and persist in language study, research suggests that integrative motivation is an essential element in language learners’ beliefs about the language acquisition process and heavily influences the decision to persist and attain high levels of language proficiency (Cziér & Dörnyei, 2005; Hernandez, 2006; Peters, 2010; Ramage, 1990). Similarly, Cochran, McCallum, and Bell (2010) found in their study of 648 university students enrolled in
beginning-level foreign language courses that students’ attitudes were the best predictors of foreign language learning.

Although existing research regarding the incentive dimension focuses primarily on motivation, Illeris emphasizes the importance of emotions on the individual learner as well (Illeris, 2007) He highlights the research of psychologist Daniel Goleman regarding emotional intelligence to further explain the incentive dimension. According to Goleman (1995) emotional intelligence includes competencies such as self-awareness, self-control, and empathy, and the arts of listening, resolving conflicts, and cooperation…being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope…a meta-ability, determining how well we can use whatever other skills we have, including raw intellect. (pp. xiv, 34 and 36)

A learners’ emotional intelligence has the potential to greatly impact the acquisition process, particularly in language learning. Language learners often adjust their levels of receptiveness to new content based on their emotional responses to language learning events (Cotterall, 2005). For example, Basista and Hill (2010) found that the degree by which language learners choose to participate in the target culture impacts their development of a language learner identity. Essential to this identity development is the learner’s emotional response and subsequent negotiation of a form of culture shock. This culture shock often occurs when the knowledge and understanding the learner has pertaining to one culture
cannot be utilized in meaning making within the second culture. It is during this culture shock, resulting from the learner’s interaction with the target culture, that many students either end the language learning experience out of frustration or persist and gain new understanding (Schumann, 1978).

Furthermore, Illeris (2003) underscores how volition—the ability to make one’s own choices—functions in adult learning. He states that adults choose what they want to learn based on what they consider meaningful to them. In the same vein, adults are less likely to learn something if the topic is not interesting to them or if they are unable to recognize the importance it. If the learner is in a position that requires them to study the topic nonetheless, they will most likely learn only parts of it or will misinterpret the information. As a result, this new knowledge is susceptible to being forgotten or incorrectly applied to future contexts (p. 173). This idea is especially applicable with regard to culturally relevant instruction in HBCU language programs. Research shows that language learners from ethnic minorities often attribute their lack interest in studying languages beyond the required level to the limited or nonexistent presentation of the diversity within the target language community (Clark, 1980; Guillaume, 1994, Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; Peters, 1994). Language learners’ volition can also be impacted by an instructors’ or language program’s bias toward one linguistic style within a target language (Beyer, 2010; Warren & Hytten, 2004).

Another important component of successfully operating in the incentive dimension is the attainment of mental and bodily balance (p. 26). Illeris (2007) describes that learning is integrated in both the psyche and the body. In this sense, it can manifest through body...
language and postures, methods of movement, and breathing. Furthermore, humans are restricted by what their brains and bodies allow them to do. For example, if the body is imbalanced due to hunger or pain, the learner may be inhibited from fully participating in the learning process. This sentiment is reminiscent of Maslow’s (1954) Hierarchy of Needs, which addresses the importance of physiological and psychological with regard to human motivation. McCombs (1991) contends that learners

have a rich internal context of beliefs, goals, expectations, feelings, and motivations that can enhance or interfere with the quality of thinking and information processing. This context needs to be understood by the learner and by learning facilitators to maximize learning and performance goals. (p. 119)

In order for educators and curriculum developers to improve programs to meet the needs of their students, they must understand the various psychological factors that influence student learning. Nevertheless, investigations in learning psychology have conventionally studied the learning of content without consideration of the incentive dimension, Illeris attests that the incentive dimension is always impacted by content. Similarly, Ritchie (2007) argues that the nature of the learning result with respect to usefulness and durability will be closely connected to how the emotional dimension has been functioning as part of the entire process. In this connection the mutual interplay of the vertical and horizontal processes show that communication content has a decisive influence on what we learn—the learning result (p. 206).
Interaction Dimension of Learning

The final dimension in this model is the interaction dimension, which focuses on action, communication, and cooperation. This component of the learning process focuses on the learner’s interaction with his or her social and physical environment. This education happens on two levels. The first is the social level where the interactive situation occurs. This could include the classroom or a small group setting. The second level of learning happens at the societal level, which provides the context of the interaction. These components influence the learner’s capacity to fully engage in the communicative and social interactions in the specific learning contexts (Illeris, 2002).

Research also shows that language students’ perspectives and understanding of the target language and associated cultures are often transformed as a result of prolonged, meaningful contact with others in the context of fluid and heterogeneous situations (McCombs, 1991; Serdyukov, 2010; Spolsky, 2000). In a qualitative study of 21 advanced-level Spanish students, Ewald (2007) found that students attributed their level of anxiety regarding Spanish to how their instructors interact with them in the classroom environment. Conversely, in Gascoigne’s (2012) investigation of 33 students in an advanced French class, she found that students who experienced a more positive and supportive environment also demonstrated better student performance in the language. Similarly, Lee (2007) found that students demonstrated greater instances of reflection—a content-related concept—as a result of collaborations with their peers.
Illeris (2009) explains that learning occurs in five basic types of learning spaces: everyday learning, school and educational learning, workplace learning, interest-based learning, and net-based learning. Everyday learning happens in the normal course of the day when the learner is not participating in any structured activity. For language learners, this style of learning may manifest by uncovering new vocabulary words or grammatical forms while reading a sign in a storefront. It could also occur when a learner asks probing questions in a conversation with a peer to seek clarification about an unknown word or phrase. School and educational learning occur within the educational system and is usually formal in nature. Examples of this type of learning include: the acquisition of cultural knowledge from reading about Afro-Dominican women and their acceptance or denial of Negritud [Blackness]; learning how to write an analytical paper with proper formatting from a presentation by a library representative; or by improving listening skills during an instructor-directed audio activity.

Workplace learning usually manifests as either incidental as a result of knowledge gained through practice or through formalized training. Language learners may experience this style of learning as they interact with co-workers and clients by code switching between languages. By consistently applying the first- and target languages in a variety of workplace scenarios, learners improve their ability to balance the use of both languages and often increase their proficiency in the target language (Serdyukov, 2010). When learners participate in interest-based learning, their motivations guide them to partake in experiences in which they can gain new knowledge. For example, these opportunities occur through
collaborations with civic organizations, community service activities, or hobbies. Language learners may develop greater awareness and cultural sensitivity by volunteering during their city’s cultural festivals or even by attending salsa-dancing gatherings on the weekends.

The final learning space pertains to net-based learning. This learning space provides a level of flexibility with time and place that other learning spaces do not offer. Examples of this type of learning include: practice websites for vocabulary and grammar, online newspapers, and online television broadcasts in the target language (Kinberg & Serdyukov, 2004). Additionally, language learners may acquire knowledge of the target language through interactions with other language speakers on social media sites.

**Strengths of the Three Dimensions of Learning Model**

An overarching benefit of this three-dimensional model of learning is the understanding that all learning occurs within and is influenced by a societal context. To illustrate this point, Illeris proposes a reconfigured model of learning which focuses on the intersection of the individual learner with his or her environment. Figure 3 exemplifies Illeris’s belief that a learner’s environment is composed of both social and societal situations. The social situations a learner encounters often include learning spaces such as their educational institutions and interactions with their communities, while the societal situations are frequently comprised of the norms and accepted constructs of the multiple societal groups in which they are members (Illeris, 2007). The individual learner then brings his or her self-perceptions, motivations, emotions, and preferred learning styles to the social and societal
learning environments. It is the intersection of the environmental and individual triangles that impacts the learner’s acquisition process.

Figure 3. Illeris’s Revised Learning Model

This reconfiguration is especially relevant with regard to language learning. It is important to note that in each explanation of the aforementioned dimensions of learning, the decisions of language learners and those who impact their learning experiences were also influenced by their relevant societies. For instance, the preconceived ideas from childhood that contribute to a learner’s meaning perspectives are undoubtedly shaped by the society in
which the childhood occurred. Through interactions with family, friends, teachers and others, the young language learner begins to build an idea—positive, negative, or neutral—about cultural and linguistic diversity. Furthermore, this child will most likely develop an emotional response to these external forces and will use this information to shape his or her receptiveness of new cultural and linguistic information.

Pulling from the incentive dimension, the Panamanian woman’s desire to learn Spanish appeared to have been motivated by differing internal and external forces (i.e. her desire apply content knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of herself, or her desire to please her grandmother). Nevertheless, varying societal norms—such as pressure from their ethnic community to remain connected to the past—may have shaped each of these motivations. In line with volition example from the incentive dimension, society also would have played a key role in the determination of language curriculum taught at an institution. Research indicates that despite the diversity of the target language communities, many romance language programs are instructed from a Eurocentric perspective (Davis, 1992; Howard & Nieto, 1999; Warren & Hytten, 2004). As such, to increase interest among minority students to improve these programs, it is critical that researchers and practitioners first acknowledge this societal influence on curriculum development and language learning.

Language learning research also emphasizes the importance of society in the students’ learning experiences. In the field of language acquisition research, the term *language socialization* is used to describe the process by which learners uncover social norms through interactions with the target culture, while simultaneously negotiating his or
her role within the new society (Ochs, 2002; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001; Poole, 1992; Rymes, 1997). This negotiation often requires the learner to adjust his or her knowledge of and familiarity with the target language and culture in response to reactions from members from the target culture. Language learners must also navigate the responses from their own cultures resulting from their decision to engage in language learning (Ochs & Shieffelin, 1986).

The incorporation of multiple dimensions of learning positions this model to be an excellent framework in the field of learning research. As previously mentioned, traditional research in this arena focused principally on the content component of learning and neglected the roles of incentive and interaction. Additionally, those studies that did research the incentive dimension within the context of learner identity and motivation, often neglected the role of environment or content on the learning process (Preece, 2005; Ritchie, 2007). Furthermore, this model is consistent with current brain research in that it incorporates content, cognition, and rationality along with incentive, emotion, and volition (Damasio, 1994, 1999).

Importance of the Three Dimensions of Learning Model in Language Learning Research at HBCUs

Similar to the current body of literature regarding learning theory, second language learning research is limited in that it focuses primarily on either content acquisition or learner motivation. Rarely do these studies attempt to combine the aforementioned components, nor
do they relate them to the context in which the learning occurs. Peter (2013) describes the usefulness of the three dimensions of learning model due to the fact that it is concerned with understanding and attending to all facets of learning when analysing a learning experience. It looks at cognitive, emotional and social processes that occur concurrently and describe the content, incentive and interaction dimensions of learning. He also acknowledges that these dimensions do not occur in a vacuum; rather they exist in a societal context. (p. 107)

HBCUs provide a unique context to examine minority students’ application of the content and incentive dimensions of learning with regard to Spanish language acquisition. According to Illeris (2003), adults’ interests in a particular topic often influence their decision to learn new material. Since many HBCUs approach the study of the Spanish language and culture from non-Eurocentric perspectives—such as Afrocentric and Latino-centric—minority students may be more motivated to invest cognitively in the study of the target language and culture (Davis, 1992; Glynn, 2012).

Furthermore, the literature on HBCUs regarding motivation and interaction often attests to the positive influence of faculty members on student learning (Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, & Young, 2005; Hernandez, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987). Brophy (1987) asserts the importance of teachers as external motivators in a learner’s environment by emphasizing that educational psychologists believe most students are capable of learning, and that their motivation to do so is related to conditioning, previous experiences, modeling,
expectations, and instruction or socialization by others, including parents and teachers. Thus, teacher behavior has been identified as at least one factor influencing motivation. (p. 293)

This positive influence may be related, in part, to the likelihood that students who attend HBCUs will have a faculty or staff member from the same gender, ethnic or racial background who can offer support or understanding (Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, & Young, 2005).

The present study aimed to understand successful Spanish language learners’ beliefs about the processes by which they successfully acquired the Spanish language. According to Illeris (2004), the three dimensions of learning triangle depicts what he views as the tension field of learning in general and of any specific learning event or learning process as stretched out between the development of functionality, sensitivity, and sociality—which all together are precisely the fundamental elements of what we call competence.

Therefore, due to its comprehensive analysis of the learning experience—particularly with regard to the societal impact of the HBCU on language learning—Illeris’s three dimensions of learning model was an appropriate conceptual framework to guide this study.

**Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework**

Harper (2010) developed a framework for the exploration of the achievement of African-American males through the National Black Male College Achievement Study (NBMCAS). This study incorporated findings from over three decades of research and
included data collected from 219 Black male students enrolled as undergraduates throughout the United States (Harper, 2012). Harper identified a trend in research regarding minorities—specifically African-American and Latino males—that focused principally on their inability to succeed in higher education or the challenges they faced within these contexts. He notes that although many researchers aspire to close the achievement gap between minorities and White students, their focus on the deficiencies of minority students continue to exacerbate the problem. Rather, Harper attests that the issue of closing this achievement gap is better served from an anti-deficit approach. In his study of minority student success in STEM fields, Harper (2010) suggests, “those who endeavor to improve student success in STEM would learn much by inviting those who have been successful to offer explanatory insights into their success” (p. 71).

As a means to uncover these insights, Harper structured his study using an anti-deficit achievement framework. The premise of this framework is to redesign research and interview questions in order to understand the ways in which students successfully navigate their academic programs. Instead of soliciting information about obstacles and challenges students encounter, Harper reframed his questions to elicit ideas regarding minority student success in STEM (see Table 1).
Table 1. Sample Reframed Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deficit Framed Questions</th>
<th>Anti-Deficit Reframed Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why do so many change their majors to non-STEM fields?</td>
<td>What compels students of color to persist in STEM fields, despite academic challenge and the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>underrepresentation of same-race peers and faculty?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are their grades and other indicators of academic</td>
<td>What enables students of color in STEM to make the dean’s list, compete for prestigious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achievement disproportionately lower than those of their</td>
<td>fellowships and research opportunities, and earn high GPAs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Asian American counterparts?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Similar to Harper’s realizations regarding the one-sided examination of African-American males in higher education, existing research on second language acquisition paints a monochromatic picture of the deficiencies, struggles, and unwillingness of minority students to learn a foreign language (Clowney & Legge, 1979; Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998). From this perspective, researchers and educators place their primary focus on the problems that exist among minority students and students attending HBCUs rather than exploring the successes experienced by their peers from similar ethnic and social contexts. In this study, my goal was to explore the language learning beliefs of successful students who are traditionally excluded from language learning research. By using the anti-deficit achievement framework in conjunction with Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model, I tailored my interview protocol to uncover students’ beliefs and practices that led to achieving proficiency in the Spanish language with regard to the content, incentive, and
interaction dimensions of learning. Table 2 provides an example of how I modified my interview questions using the anti-deficit achievement framework to focus on student achievement within these dimensions.

Table 2. Modified Sample Deficit and Anti-Deficit Framed Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deficit Framed Questions</th>
<th>Anti-Deficit Reframed Questions</th>
<th>Relevant Dimensions of Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the reasons students give for choosing not to major in the Spanish language?</td>
<td>How have you found ways to relate what you study in Spanish to your own personal, educational, and career goals?</td>
<td>Content &amp; Incentive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are minority students less likely than White students to use the Spanish language outside of the college classroom?</td>
<td>What factors influenced your decisions to utilize campus resources or participate in clubs and student organizations related to the Spanish language and associated cultures?</td>
<td>Incentive &amp; Interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the complexities of student achievement in second language acquisition have yet to be fully investigated, more research is needed to understand the counter narratives that exist along the continuum. This is particularly true regarding language study at HBCUs—a context that has been largely overlooked in the second language acquisition conversation. By focusing on student language learning success, this investigation aimed to provide continued support for burgeoning narratives on minority student achievement and the positive impact HBCUs have on student success. In this new narrative, HBCUs and minority students are
members of a language-learning solution, rather than cast in their traditional roles of contributing to a problem.

**Chapter Summary**

HBCUs are indispensable resources in the nation’s production of minority linguists. This chapter outlined the need for language study at American institutions of higher education, specifically as it relates to the Spanish language. It also reflects upon the history of language instruction at HBCUs and argues their continued relevance in today’s higher education landscape. The chapter also addresses the lenses of language learning research and concludes with the presentation of Illeris’s (2002) three-dimensional model for learning and Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework as conceptual frameworks for the study. The next chapter will discuss the research design that I utilized to understand the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU. The chapter will also outline how I collected and analyzed the data, in addition to how I ensured trustworthiness.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. I was interested in understanding the experiences of students who found success in the study of Spanish at a historically Black university. The literature overlooks how the effect of institutional culture, language content, and student identity at HBCUs contribute to the Spanish learning process. By investigating the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language students within this context, this study sought to address these unresolved issues by providing rich thick descriptions of how students perceive language content, their identities and motivations, and the HBCU learning environment to shape their success in the acquisition of Spanish.

The research questions that guided this study were: 1) What learning experiences and teaching methods do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU perceive to be beneficial to the acquisition process? 2) How do the internal and external motivations of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU influence their experiences in the language acquisition process? 3) In what ways do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU interact with the target culture and/or language? These questions could allow Spanish language educators at the college level to gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics, backgrounds, and needs of the students they are charged to instruct. As a result, the principle audience for this study includes Spanish language faculty members and educators of future Spanish language faculty.
Case Study Approach

In an effort to gain an in-depth understanding of this topic, I used an exploratory collective case study approach. A case study is “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e. setting, context)” (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 73). A case study is also considered a profound exploration of a modern experience within the actual context in which it occurs (Yin, 2009). This approach can be characterized as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective (Mertens, 2010). An intrinsic case study, comparable to the narrative approach, is one in which a case illustrates a unique circumstance and the researcher’s attention is on the case itself (Creswell, 2012). Unlike a narrative, the intrinsic case study is bounded by the context of the case. An instrumental case study is conducted in order to understand an experience for the purpose of generalizing findings to other cases (Mertens, 2010).

In a collective case study (also referred to as a multiple case study), rather than evaluating a single case, the researcher explores a variety of cases (Creswell, 2012). Using this approach, the researcher initially conducts a within-case analysis by examining each case individually and identifying themes. Following this step, a cross-case analysis occurs in which the researcher compares overarching themes and interpretations from each of the individual cases. These salient themes and interpretations are compared with those from the remaining cases in order to provide assertions for the collective case (Creswell, 2012).

Case study research was the ideal approach for this investigation since I sought to understand each student’s experience bounded within the real-life context of their enrollment.
as Spanish language students at Winston-Salem State University. More specifically, I chose to conduct a collective case study in order to provide a more compelling and robust exploration of this phenomenon than would result from the investigation of a single case (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Each student selected to participate in the investigation is considered an individual case, and therefore, the unit of analysis. I realized that each student brought his or her own unique identities, educational and linguistic backgrounds and prior knowledge to the collegiate language learning experience. I also understood that the combination of each student’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivations was unique to that individual and had the potential to influence how he or she perceived the language learning process. Since my goal was to understand the language learning beliefs of successful students at an HBCU, I needed to employ a methodology that allowed for comparison to the current body of literature—literal replication—and the exploration of contrasting explanations—
thoretical replications (Yin, 2009).

The flexibility of collective case study methodology complemented my constructivist perspective regarding research. Because I believe that the experiences students encounter and the persons with whom they interact shape their realities, I realize that their interpretations of these interactions create opportunities for a myriad of explanations for the same phenomenon. By selecting multiple participants to serve separately as individual cases and then identifying commonalities among the students’ experiences, I aspired to gain an overall understanding of how students successfully navigated the Spanish language learning process at their HBCU.


**Study Context**

I conducted this collective case study on the campus of Winston-Salem State University, a public historically Black research university located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Out of the eleven historically Black colleges in the state of North Carolina, this institution is one of only four that offers students the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree in Spanish (Winston-Salem State University, 2014). It also provides the option of Spanish as a minor course of study with the completion of 18 semester hours beyond the elementary Spanish courses. During the spring 2013 and fall 2013 academic semesters, WSSU’s lower-level to upper-level Spanish course enrollment most closely reflected the 5:1 national average at 5.5:1 and 6.1:1, respectively (Winston-Salem State University, 2014). Furthermore this ratio exceeded the national average of lower-level to upper-level enrollment during the spring semester of 2014 at 1.5:1. These enrollment trends may signify a shift in students’ perceptions and successes in the field and may provide insight for the direction of language programs at other institutions.

**Gaining Access**

Gaining access to a research site is a critical component of qualitative research. Creswell (2012) explains that gaining access requires the researcher to receive approval from the appropriate institutional review board and locate persons who can assist data collection process (p. 151). I first applied for the approval of the North Carolina State University Human Subject Review Board (IRB) in order to conduct my study (see Appendices A and B). After the NCSU IRB granted permission, I contacted the Acting Chairperson and the
three Spanish faculty members in the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Winston-Salem State University. In an introductory email to the Acting Chairperson and Spanish faculty members (see Appendix C), I described the purpose of my study as well as the procedures I planned to use in order to collect data. Additionally, I explained the criteria for student participation in the study and shared the manner by which I planned to locate these students. I also clarified how I intended to maintain students’ confidentiality and then asked for suggestions regarding reaching students within my target population.

Of the faculty contacted, one agreed to serve as a key informant regarding potential Spanish language students who were considered “information-rich” cases in this study (Creswell, 2012; Mertens, 2010). This faculty member also agreed to be my on-campus sponsor as I applied for permission to conduct the study from Winston-Salem State University’s IRB Office (see Appendix D). After receiving approval from the WSSU IRB, my faculty sponsor emailed me the names and email address for the eleven potential student participants. Among the eleven students in making up the population, six had declared Spanish majors and five had Spanish minors. I then sent each student an email explaining the purpose of the study (see Appendix E), the procedures I planned to use, and their rights as participants. I also provided my contact phone number and requested a conversation with each of them to answer any possible questions they have about the study.

I then visited a third-year level Spanish class meeting at the invitation of my faculty sponsor to personally introduce myself and explained the study to seven of the potential participants. During the class meeting, three of the students expressed interest in participation
and signed consent forms. The two remaining study participants indicated their desire to participate through email correspondences. While both participants signed consent forms, one returned the form electronically and the other student submitted the form at the beginning of the interview. After I generated a list of students who consented to participate, I emailed a link to the Survey Monkey website for students to complete a short questionnaire (see Appendix F) that requested information regarding their educational background and motivations to learn Spanish. Furthermore, I asked students to assist in the location of more potential participants. By incorporating students in the recruitment process, they were able to attest to my role as the researcher and had the potential to increase student interest among their peers.

**Site and Sample Selection**

Due to the nature of this collective case study, the population was eleven full- or part-time upper-level undergraduate Spanish language students currently attending Winston-Salem State University. The literature on foreign language studies at HBCUs shows that these students are more likely to identify as underrepresented minorities, are less inclined to study abroad, and have decreased chances of earning a degree in the target language when compared to their white peers—particularly at predominantly white institutions (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Peters, 1994). This study focused on a sample of five students—bound by their enrollment status at Winston-Salem State University—who defied these trends and demonstrated oral proficiency in Spanish, enrolled in upper-level Spanish courses, officially declared a Spanish major, or
studied abroad in order to achieve fluency in the Spanish language. For units of analysis, each student selected to participate in the investigation was considered an individual case.

In reference to the number of cases I examined in this study, I followed Creswell’s (2012) suggestion, which states:

For case study research, I would recommend no more than 4 or 5 case studies in a single study. This number should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis. (p. 157)

The literature suggests that minority students are less likely to participate in advanced levels of language study when compared to their Caucasian peers (Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Peters, 1994). Therefore, in an attempt to achieve maximum variation in this study, I purposefully sampled participants from a variety of races and ethnicities from the pool of students who met the initial eligibility criteria. Maximum variation refers to “determining in advance some criteria that differentiate the sites or participants, and then selecting sites or participants that are quite different on the criteria” (p. 157). By exploring the perceptions of students from multiple backgrounds, this study endeavored to provide a clearer picture of how a broad range of students find success in acquiring the Spanish language in the context of an HBCU.

The goal of qualitative research is not generalizability from a selected sample to the overall population (Mertens, 2010). Nevertheless, collective case study research encourages investigators to select cases because “it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collections of cases” (Stake,
To this end, I used purposive and criterion sampling strategies to select the site and sample for this study (Creswell, 2007; Krathwohl, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Krathwohl (2009) describes purposive sampling as a selection strategy that is frequently used in qualitative research in order to choose participants that will “better inform the researcher regarding the current focus of the investigation” (p. 172). Similarly, Mertens (2010) explains that purposive sampling is ideal for “identifying information-rich cases that will allow [researchers] to study a case in-depth” (p. 320). Criterion sampling refers to the selection of cases based on a set of criteria established by the researcher (Creswell, 2012; Mertens, 2010). Utilizing this method of sampling provides quality assurance in the selection of cases.

Criteria for site selection for the sample included school status as a historically Black college or institution, the availability of a Spanish degree program, Spanish language enrollment statistics comparable to the national average, accessibility of the institution, and the school’s willingness to join the investigation (Krathwohl, 2009; Mertens, 2010). Winston-Salem State University, founded in 1892, is classified by the federal government as one of eleven historically Black colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina. Of these institutions, WSSU is one of four that offers the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Spanish (Winston-Salem State University, 2014). Furthermore, of the four HBCUs that offer Spanish degrees, WSSU’s student enrollment in lower-level to upper-level Spanish courses most closely reflected the national average.
I attempted to recruit six students using a snowball technique. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), in this method of sampling, the researcher selects cases that inform the research problem or central phenomenon being studied through the assistance of other individuals who know of potential cases that are “information-rich.” I requested the assistance of the Department Chairperson and instructors to identify current language students at the University who could be classified as successful Spanish language learners. One faculty member supplied email addresses for the potential student participants. I also asked students for their assistance in identifying additional cases. Despite these efforts, the final sample included four Spanish majors and one Spanish minor. Due to the limited size of the population and Creswell’s recommendation to use four to five cases in a single study, I moved forward with the five interested students.

In order to determine eligibility, the five interested students completed a short questionnaire via the survey website, Survey Monkey, describing their educational background and motivations in the discipline. The criterion for student participation in this study was identification as successful Spanish language learners. Modified from Anya’s (2011) definition of successful second language learners, a successful Spanish language learner must have studied Spanish as a language other than his or her native language, and must meet at least two of the following criteria:

- **Proficiency rating:** He or she has been rated at the level of *Superior* via the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Assessment of Performance Toward Proficiency in Languages,
• **Course completion:** He or she studied in a university Spanish-language program at the advanced level of courses listed at the 3000 or above,

• **Declaration of Spanish major:** He or she has been enrolled in various college-level language courses with the aim of earning a baccalaureate degree or in the discipline as indicated by the declaration of a Spanish major,

• **Study abroad experience:** He or she spent an extensive period of time (5 or more weeks) in another Spanish-speaking country to attain fluency.

On the ACTFL Oral Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages, a student at the *Superior* level is able to converse about an assortment of topics in formal and informal situations in Spanish. The speaker can also build their own hypotheses and examine other options. Although errors may arise during the course of dialogue, students at this level “demonstrate no pattern of error in the use of basic structures” (ACTFL, 2014, p. 5). The *Superior* level is second only to the *Distinguished* level of oral proficiency on the ACTFL scale. Additional ACTFL Proficiency levels include: *Novice Low, Novice Mid, Novice High, Intermediate Low, Intermediate Mid, Intermediate High, Advanced Low, Advanced Mid, and Advanced High*. An extensive period of time in the context of this study referred to a period of study of four or more weeks in a Spanish-speaking country or territory that is not part of the 48 contiguous United States, Hawaii, or Alaska. After demonstrating their eligibility, the five participants also provided informed consent, agreed to participate in tape-recorded interviews, and were able to describe their experiences as successful Spanish language students.
Data Collection

After participants were identified, I collected data from interviews with the selected students, letters of advice provided by the participants, and initial email questionnaires. By collecting data from multiple sources, I had an opportunity to corroborate my data (Yin, 2009). The incorporation of this step added an additional dimension of reliability to this study.

Creswell (2012) provides a detailed description of how to conduct interviews. In the formula provided, after having generated research questions addressing the problem and identifying participants to interview, the researcher must first select the type of interview that is appropriate for the study. Various interviews that could be conducted are telephone interviews, focus groups, or one-on-one interviews. With telephone interviews, the researcher asks the participants a series of questions during a telephone conversation. This option is optimal in a situation in which the researcher and interviewee are separated by distance. Unfortunately, this method of interviewing prohibits the researcher from observing additional levels of communication such as body language. Interviewing participants in a focus group, although employing a question and answer format, also incorporates the added dynamic of conducting an interview in a group setting. Despite the benefits of interaction between interviewees contributing to the richness of the data collected, focus groups have the disadvantage of stifling those participants who are less comfortable participating during group discussions. One-on-one interviews take place between a single interviewer and interviewee. This style of interviewing provides the researcher with the opportunity to seek
clarification, if needed, through the incorporation of probing questions. For the purpose of this study, I conducted one-on-one interviews with the student participants. This style of interviewing allowed me as the researcher an opportunity to seek clarification, if needed, through the use of probing questions.

The protocol outlined by Creswell (2012) also instructs researchers to ensure that appropriate procedures for recording the one-on-one interviews are used. Despite the recommendation to use lapel microphones, the equipment utilized in this study were two Sony ICD-PX820 Digital Voice Recorders due to their personal computer and Macintosh compatibility, USB connectivity, and availability from the North Carolina State University library (North Carolina State University, 2015). Two devices were in used during each interview in the event that one device fails to record the entire interview.

Creswell’s (2012) interview outline also encourages the development of a useful interview protocol. In preparation for the analysis of data using the selected conceptual frameworks, I created my interview protocol based on Illeris’ (2002) three dimensions of learning model and Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework (see Appendix G). Through this method, several open-ended interview questions were generated in relation to each of the dimensions proposed within the conceptual framework. Furthermore, by utilizing the anti-deficit achievement framework, I was able to construct my questions in a way that elicited responses regarding students’ success and persistence in the study of Spanish. Due to the open-ended quality of the questions, I presented students with the opportunity to provide as much information in response to the questions as they deemed
necessary. In the event that I felt further clarification was warranted, I asked probing questions to the participant to gain a deeper understanding of the experience. As a result of this structure, the interviews conducted could be classified as semi-structured. Mertens (2010) describes semi-structured interviews as follows:

…the researcher develops an interview guide with topics, issues, or questions that they intend to cover during the interview. The researcher is open to following leads from the respondent to determine the ordering of questions and the use of probes to further explore relevant points. (p. 371)

The next step in the interview data collection process was the selection of a place to conduct the interview (Creswell, 2012). To ensure the maximum amount of participation with consideration being made to student convenience, these interviews took place at Winston-Salem State University. One of the main aspects considered was the assurance that the location was quiet and conducive to audio recording. As a result, each interview took place in one of two private, enclosed rooms—the student lounge and an empty conference room, both in the Department of World Languages and Cultures. Since at the time of the interviews, one student was unable to meet face-to-face, the interview occurred using the Skype application. Skype is a free web-based video conferencing service that allows real-time video conversations. During the Skype interview, I was also able to utilize the two Sony voice recorders. Additionally, I recorded the conversation using the video recorder feature on the Photo Booth application provided by my Macintosh computer. Although the voice
recorders produced easily intelligible audio files, this additional step provided a clearer recording of the Skype interview.

During the initial meeting with each interviewee, Creswell (2012) emphasizes that the researcher should present the participant with a consent form and explain the purpose of the study. In this investigation, I provided the student participants with a consent form (see Appendix H) detailing the expectations for participation in this study. I informed them that participation in the investigation is on a voluntary basis and that they may elect to remove themselves from the study at any time without fear of repercussions.

As a final step in the interview process, Creswell (2012) indicates that the researcher should use good interview etiquette. This is accomplished by refraining from deviation from the interview protocol, adhering to the allotted time for each interview, being respectful of the interviewee, and being a good listener. I ensured that each session lasted no more than sixty minutes by following the interview protocol as prescribed. However, I also allowed the interviewee the opportunity to provide as many details about his or her experiences as he or she elected to share. Additionally, while I made an effort to maintain eye contact and serve as an active listener, I also made observational field notes pertaining to facial and body expressions during the interview process. After conducting each interview, the audiotapes were transcribed and I listened to the audiotapes and reread the transcriptions for accuracy. I also incorporated the validation strategy of member checking by sending a copy of the typed transcripts to the study participants to check for any omissions or necessary corrections.
An additional data source I used in this study was a review of documents. The use of documents in the investigation of a case is a means to substantiate and enhance the data collected from other sources (Yin, 2009). According to Bowen (2009),

…documents can be analysed as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources…When there is convergence of information from different sources, readers of the research report usually have greater confidence in the trustworthiness (credibility) of the findings. (p. 30)

Advantages associated with the use of documents in qualitative research include: efficiency with regard to data selection versus data collection; availability; cost-effectiveness; inability of being influenced by the research process; stability in relation to opportunities for repeated review; incorporation of exact names, references, and other detailed information; and presentation of topics over an extended period of time (p. 31).

For the purpose of this study, I asked participants to write a letter to incoming first year students (see Appendix I) in which they gave advice about how to succeed in learning Spanish at Winston-Salem State University. In the document prompt, I requested that the participants introduce themselves to the hypothetical incoming student by providing a detailed description of their language learning background and exposure to other languages and cultures leading up to their matriculation at WSSU. By introducing themselves in this manner, students divulged details regarding motivations to study the Spanish language as well as various levels of exposure to the language they had during their formative years. I also encouraged the students to consider identifying any opportunities of which new students
should take advantage, pitfalls they should avoid, challenges they may encounter, and resources that are available to them. Upon completing the letters, students emailed them to my university email address. Since I requested the participants to generate these letters for the purpose of this study, these data are considered elicited texts (Charmaz, 2006). In addition to the added value of retrieving more background information from the participants, these texts do not run the risk of mistaken context, time, or original purpose in the way that extant texts would (Mertens, 2010).

To securely store the data, I kept a master list detailing all of the collected information. I saved all electronic files on two external hard drives located in separate secure locations—my home office and my office located at North Carolina Central University. At each of these locales, the external hard drives, when not in use, were locked in file cabinets to which I only had access. I also secured documents collected from participants in the file cabinet at my North Carolina Central University office when not in use. Once the methods of ensuring trustworthiness are completed, the data will be ready for the process of analysis.

**Data Analysis**

The framework I used to analyze data is one proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consisted of three specific phases—data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the reduction phase, I sorted, condensed, and transformed the data from the interview transcripts and participants’ advisory letters to incoming students. As I reduced the data, I identified not only the information that each participant provided, but also the frequency of and emphasis placed on the issues they
addressed. This phase of analysis allowed me to make the large amount of data easier to manage as well as provided a structured system for the eventual comparison of themes related to the phenomenon among the various cases.

As a first step in the reduction of my data, I began with the process of within-case analysis. By using this method, a researcher details the specifics of each case and examines each case for themes (Creswell, 2012). I then personally transcribed three of the participants’ interviews and submitted the two remaining interviews electronically to the transcription service, Rev.com, using encrypted files. After the interviews were transcribed, I performed open coding on the transcripts. Open coding involves allocating a label to sections of data that relate to one another conceptually (Mertens, 2010). I initially read and reread the transcripts individually to familiarize myself with the data. For each transcript, assigned an initial set of codes and supplemented these with thoughts I had while reading each portion of the transcript. After recording these preliminary codes and thoughts, I created a secondary list of codes that were more streamlined from having participated in the initial coding experience. This secondary list resulted from the elimination of codes that occurred only once or infrequently in each case’s data. I utilized the second list of codes from each case to generate a codebook that included definitions of each code along with examples.

The next stage in data reduction involved simplifying the data from each participant’s advisory letter in order to transform the information into meaningful codes. For this step, I followed Bowen’s (2009) model regarding the “skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation” (p. 32) of the participants’ letters of advice to
incoming students. Rather than performing open coding, I employed a priori coding for each case’s advisory letter by using predefined codes generated from the interview in the respective case.

Following the reduction phase, I displayed the data from each case’s interview transcript in an organized chart (see Appendix J). This phase of data analysis allows the researcher to summarize information into a format that facilitates the generation of conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I first listed the learning experiences, events, and activities identified by the student participant. Then I recorded the various codes I assigned to each during the open coding and a priori coding processes, the dimensions of learning to which they pertained, and how they were relevant to the student’s Spanish language acquisition process. I analyzed the codes that had been generated and performed a categorical aggregation. According to Creswell (2012), categorical aggregations are “the larger categories derived during case study data analysis and composed of multiple incidents that are aggregated” (p. 294). I assigned a color to each of the codes and recoded the data using the new colorized coding scheme. Upon completion of transcript coding, I identified patterns among the thematic categories in order to reduce the number of initial groupings (p. 199).

The process of data analysis of the interview transcript and advisory letters was repeated for each case. I used patterns that emerged from the within-case analyses to identify lessons learned from each case.

Once I identified patterns for each of the cases through the within-case analyses, I conducted a cross-case analysis. A cross-case analysis in a collective case study involves the
researcher examining themes resulting from within-case analyses with themes arising from other cases in the study in an attempt to identify similarities and differences (Creswell, 2012). When conducting a cross-case analysis, it is important to select either a case-survey approach or the case-comparison approach (Yin, 1981). The case-survey approach occurs when cross-case comparisons are made by coding individual elements and identifying cross-case similarities and is dependent upon two factors: (a) the significance of giving special attention to individual factors within each case study; and (b) a large number of case studies to substantiate cross-case calculations (p. 62). In contrast, the case-comparison approach is suitable for smaller scale cross-case analyses and involves developing an appropriate explanation for each individual case during the within-case analysis and sufficiently creating a common explanation based on the lessons learned from each case (p. 63).

Due to the number of cases in this study, I used a case-comparison approach for the cross-case analysis. Similar to the within-case analysis, I displayed the data from each case in an organized chart (see Appendix K). This chart, however, contained the salient learning events and codes from each case as well as the applicable dimensions of learning and the overall relevance each student prescribes the learning events to the Spanish language acquisition process. During the case-comparison, I then examined the lessons derived from each case in relation to the other cases in the study.

The final phase of the analysis process involved drawing conclusions and verification. This phase requires that the researcher assign meaning to the data in order to understand how they address the study’s research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the
verification process, I used the constant comparison method of revisiting the data and reevaluating the previously identified patterns in order to substantiate my conclusions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is at this stage that I conducted a naturalistic generalization by providing an overarching description of the collective cases in order to evaluate how the findings answered the research questions of my study (Creswell, 2012).

**Trustworthiness**

To uphold the rigor of my study, I utilized Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) definition of trustworthiness that details issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In line with the tenets of credibility, I: had prolonged engagement with the participants through interviews; used multiple sources; peer debriefed with my colleagues by asking them to review my interview protocol for clarity and consistency; presented negative case analyses by identifying data that may seem extemporaneous or out of the norm; and conducted member checks by providing my participants with a transcript of the interview data. To ensure transferability, I provided rich, thick descriptions of each of my cases, the context of my study, and the themes that arose during the process of data analysis. The rigor of my study guaranteed dependability through detailed explanations of my data collection methods and my decisions regarding how I analyzed the data. Additionally, I ensured confirmability by consistently documenting field notes that describe my reflections or any choices I make that might have strayed from my original plans.
Researcher’s Role and Ethical Considerations

In this study, I worked with human subjects. Consequently, there were certain ethical issues that I had to address. The participants in this study represented a marginalized group as a result of their vulnerable positions as students. There were risks of personal disclosure as well as the need to protect the participants’ identities. Therefore, I clearly communicated with my participants their rights at multiple instances throughout the study. I informed them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of retaliation of any kind. I explained my role as the researcher and why I am interested in this particular population. Furthermore, I was sure to explain how I intended to use the findings of the study and invited the participants to perform member checks by reviewing my interpretation of the data collected for accuracy. I also used pseudonyms for participant names.

Subjectivity Statement

As a graduate of a Spanish language program at a historically Black university and now as a Spanish instructor at an HBCU, I am aware that my previous knowledge and experiences may have impacted the way in which I understood the themes and concepts that arose from the collected data. My interest in this topic originated from my experiences as an undergraduate student who noticed the same few peers in every upper-level Spanish course. I did not understand why so many talented students opted out of language study after completing their graduation requirement. This was particularly illogical because most students confessed that they understood that being proficient in another language would be beneficial in their future careers. My concern increased as I began teaching Spanish at the
university level and noticed that students would follow the same pattern as my former colleagues. More disturbingly, many students who elected to enroll in the intermediate levels of Spanish—that were not required—often ended their studies and changed their major or minor when they reached the more advanced levels. It was therefore my goal to understand the positive influences on the success of students as identified by the students themselves in order to understand the essence of this experience. Although my experiences could warrant concerns with regard to the validity of the findings, I also acknowledge that these same experiences provided a deeper understanding of the cases being presented due to my previous exposure to the phenomenon under investigation. In an effort to preserve the reliability of the data, I incorporated such measures as constant memoing, member checking, thick descriptions, and collecting data from multiple sources.

Limitations of the Study

I encountered the following limitations with regard to the current study. Due to the absence of literature regarding successful Spanish language learners at HBCUs, this study served as an exploratory investigation. Nevertheless, the findings of this study could draw the attention of the language learning research community to topic that has been omitted from the current body of knowledge. Moreover, in this study I chose to focus solely on the perceptions of successful Spanish language learners. Although limited in scope, the literature that currently exists regarding Spanish language study and minority students examines the experiences of students who choose not to persist in their language studies. Conversely, I was interested in understanding why and how any successful Spanish language learner at an
HBCU succeeds and persists. As a result, my study participants may not have identified many of the obstacles that inhibit student success at this particular institution. Nevertheless, I made the decision to include only the experiences of successful students in this field in order to lay the groundwork for developing a model of success with regard to this phenomenon.

An additional limitation to this investigation is the study site. I purposefully chose Winston-Salem State University as the context of my study due to the availability of the bachelor’s degree in Spanish and the minor course of study. Additionally, the Department of World Languages and Cultures, in which the Spanish program operates, collaborates with the Office of International Programs to provide students an opportunity to earn up to 15 semester hours in transfer credit to study abroad (Winston-Salem State University, 2014). As a result, the findings of this study would be specific to the historically Black institution at which it was conducted. I recognize that the aim of qualitative research is not to produce results that are generalizable to a larger population (Mertens, 2010). However, by understanding the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at Winston-Salem State University, I may assist my colleagues in the Spanish language instruction community to better understand and better theorize among their own cases (Stake, 1995). I also recognize that the presence of the aforementioned resources may have impacted the number of students who continue the study of the Spanish language, thus increasing my potential sample size. Furthermore, the diversity of the language learning opportunities at this institution may have provided an opportunity for the collection of rich data.
Chapter Summary

The purpose of this exploration was to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. I achieved this by utilizing a qualitative collective case study approach. I further framed this study using Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model, which states that learning occurs at the intersection of the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions within a societal context. For examining language-learning beliefs specifically from the perspective of successful Spanish language learners, I also utilized Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework.

The preceding chapter provided a detailed explanation of my selected methodological approach and the subsequent design of the study. The chapter also presented the selection of the site and participants, methods of data collection, and the process by which I analyzed the data. I also explicated the steps used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical considerations associated with the participation of undergraduate Spanish language students. The chapter concluded with a statement of my subjectivity as the researcher and the limitations of the study.
CHAPTER 4. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. The study centered on the perceptions of five undergraduate Spanish language students. All of the participants were enrolled full-time at Winston-Salem State University and had completed at least one third-year Spanish course.

I began collecting data after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Boards at North Carolina State University and Winston-Salem State University on October 9, 2014 and November 19, 2014, respectively. The selected research design was a collective case study approach, which allowed me as the researcher to explore each student case’s experience bounded within the real-life context of their enrollment as Spanish language students at Winston-Salem State University. The study used purposive and criterion sampling strategies to select the participants. Five participants were selected, each of who were enrolled as full-time undergraduate students and had completed at least one third-year Spanish course at the time of data collection.

I analyzed each student case separately by conducting within-case analyses, then compared the overarching themes from each individual case by performing a cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2012). The exploration of more than one case provided the opportunity for a more robust study (Yin, 2009). The methods of data collection included a qualifying questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis in order to elicit the
participants’ perceptions regarding language study. In this chapter, I will provide a
description of the study site, program description, and profiles of each student case.

Study Site

Winston-Salem State University is a public historically Black research university
founded in 1892 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. WSSU is one of the seventeen sister
institutions within the University of North Carolina System. Among the eleven historically
Black colleges and universities in the state, WSSU is one of only four that offers the
Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish. As of the fall semester of 2013, undergraduates
accounted for 4,938 of the 5,399 students enrolled at the university. Of those students 71% 
were women and 29% were men. Students who identified as African American or Black
accounted for 72% of all undergraduates and Whites made up 18%. Students identifying in
any other ethnic or racial category each accounted for no more than 3% of the undergraduate

Program Description

The Bachelor of Arts degree program in Spanish is housed under the World
Languages and Cultures Department within the College of Arts, Sciences, Business and
Education. The program’s purpose is listed as preparing students “for multiple employment
opportunities and graduate studies” by offering “courses designed to develop the language
skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing” (Winston-Salem State University,
2015). Prior to the declaration of a major in Spanish, students must have completed the
second-year intermediate language courses (SPA 2311 and SPA2312). Students may also
demonstrate evidence of intermediate-level proficiency in Spanish in lieu of matriculation in the intermediate courses. A minor course of study in Spanish is also available for students who complete 18 semester hours of coursework beyond the elementary level. Students must also earn a grade of C or higher in any Spanish courses during or prior to their enrollment at WSSU. Table 3 provides a listing of the courses offered by the WSSU Spanish program during the 2014-2015 academic year. As presented in the chart, students who persist to the upper levels of the Spanish program receive the added value of exploring the mechanics, history, literature, and cultural diversity of the language and associated cultures.

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<td>SPA 4093</td>
<td>Spanish Internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Elementary Spanish II</td>
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<td>History of the Spanish Language</td>
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<td>Intermediate Spanish II</td>
<td>SPA 4333</td>
<td>Masterpieces of Hispanic Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 2320</td>
<td>Spanish for International Affairs</td>
<td>SPA 4334</td>
<td>Masterpieces of Hispanic Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 3310</td>
<td>Spanish Composition and Grammar</td>
<td>SPA 4335</td>
<td>Masterpieces of Hispanic Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 3311</td>
<td>Hispanic Civilization</td>
<td>SPA 4336</td>
<td>Independent Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 3312</td>
<td>Spanish Phonetics</td>
<td>SPA 4340</td>
<td>Cervantes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 3316</td>
<td>Spanish Conversation and Pronunciation</td>
<td>SPA 4350</td>
<td>Senior Composition in Spanish</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPA 3323</td>
<td>Cultures of the Spanish-Speaking World</td>
<td>SPA 4390</td>
<td>Special Topics or Readings in Hispanic Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 3333</td>
<td>Survey of Spanish Literature</td>
<td>SPA 4391</td>
<td>Senior Seminar in Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 3335</td>
<td>Survey of Spanish-American Literature</td>
<td>SPA 3339</td>
<td>Survey of Latino Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 3382</td>
<td>Hispanic Literature in Translation</td>
<td>SPA 4338</td>
<td>Masterpieces of Afro-Hispanic Literature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the fall semester of 2014 during which time the data for this study were collected, the Spanish program had a total of six students with declared majors in Spanish and five students with declared minors. During the spring 2013 and fall 2013 academic semesters, the program’s lower-level to upper-level Spanish course enrollment 5.5:1 and 6.1:1, respectively (Winston-Salem State University, 2014). During the spring semester of 2014 the ratio adjusted to 1.5:1—well above the national average of 5:1 (Howard, 2007). The department offers the following resources for its students: a foreign language laboratory, in-house tutoring, and a student lounge.

The WSSU Spanish language faculty includes two women and one man. Two of the faculty members earned Doctoral degrees—one in Romance Languages and the other is unlisted. One instructor has a Master’s degree in Foreign Language Education with a concentration in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). All of the Spanish faculty members are African American. Faculty demographics and research interests are listed in Table 4. Faculty member identification numbers were not used during the course of the study. They are listed below solely for organizational purposes.
Table 4. 2014-2015 Spanish Instructor Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty Member ID</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Earned Degree</th>
<th>Research Interests</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
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<tr>
<td>#1</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>#2</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Participant Demographics

Five students were selected to participate in this study. All participants were enrolled as full-time students at Winston-Salem State University and each had taken at least one third-year course. Three of the participants were Black women, while two of the participants were White males. Three students in the sample were in their senior year of study at the University. The two remaining students held junior and sophomore statuses. Two of the participants in their senior year were nontraditional students—one of whom began a fifth year of undergraduate study that semester.
Only two of the participants indicated being evaluated on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Oral Proficiency Interview. These students received ratings at the *Advanced Low* and *Superior* levels. Four of the participants were taking classes in pursuit of a Bachelor’s degree in Spanish as indicated by the declaration of a Spanish major. The remaining participant registered Spanish as a minor course of study with the University Registrar. Two of the study participants previously studied abroad for a period of four or more weeks in a Spanish-speaking country or territory that is not part of the 48 contiguous United States, Hawaii, or Alaska. The pseudonyms for the participants are Eric, Janelle, Laila, Malcolm, and Renée. Table 5 provides a brief background of the study participants.

Table 5. Backgrounds of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>ACTFL Rating</th>
<th>3rd Year Course</th>
<th>Spanish Major/Minor</th>
<th>Study Abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Adv. Low</td>
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<td>Major</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janelle</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laila</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Junior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Renée</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Profiles**

**Case One: Eric**

Eric is a White male in his final semester of study at Winston-Salem State University. His declared major is Spanish and he also studies Portuguese. Eric is a nontraditional student
who began his undergraduate career after working for several years as a diesel mechanic. He originally enrolled in college as a means to move further in his profession. As a student, Eric spent time studying abroad in Uruguay. During this period, he matriculated in advanced courses of study such as: Grammatical Theory; History of the *Río Plata* III; Uruguayan History II; Latin American Literature III; and Latin American Culture. He also spent time abroad in Puerto Rico and Argentina.

Eric is the oldest participant study and is the student with the most study abroad experience. In addition to his two trips to Spanish speaking countries specifically for educational reasons, he frequently traveled abroad with his family on business and leisure trips. His responses to the interview questions most often related to his role as a tutor and ways in which he is able to use prior knowledge to help his peers. Eric was also the participant who most often critiqued the existing curriculum. Eric also participated in a number of activities that demonstrated his desire to learn for the sheer joy of learning. He describes his return to college after being in the workforce as a pleasurable—and sometimes surreal—experience.

Eric received a rating of *Advanced Low* on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview. This rating indicates that Eric demonstrated his ability to actively engage in formal and informal conversations regarding issues of local, national, and international import. He indicates that his appreciation of the Spanish language and the associated cultures was the motivation behind his decision to study
Spanish in college. Most of all, Eric enjoys discussing current events and literature associated with the Spanish-speaking world.

During his interview, Eric shared that his ethnic background and identity as a nontraditional student heavily shaped the way he interacted with his peers, faculty members, and Spanish language community. He admitted that although these qualities sometimes posed challenges in his attempt to integrate into the role of an undergraduate HBCU student, his unique perspective often served to enhance—and sometimes, challenge—the learning environment he encountered in the WSSU Spanish program. He also shared that by embracing his mistakes and consistently utilizing the Spanish language on a daily basis, he was able to develop the skills necessary to become a proficient speaker of Spanish. Eric further confided that the emotional support provided by his faculty members’ belief in his ability to succeed encouraged him to persist in his program.

Case Two: Janelle

Janelle is a Black female who is a senior Spanish and deaf studies major. During her matriculation at Winston-Salem State University, she enrolled in advanced courses such as: Spanish Conversation and Pronunciation; Advanced Spanish Composition; and Spanish Composition and Grammar. Janelle elected to study the Spanish language because she wants to be able to communicate with a variety of persons. She explains that she most enjoys
learning about Spanish grammatical structures because it provides her with a deeper understanding of the mechanics of the English language.

Janelle’s appreciation for the Spanish language and the associated cultures was also impacted by her experience studying abroad in Costa Rica while in high school. During her undergraduate career, she spent a semester abroad studying in Seville, Spain and is currently using her experience to motivate her peers in their pursuit of language proficiency. Janelle is planning to directly enroll in a university in Latin America over the summer.

At the time of Janelle’s interview she had recently returned from a semester long study abroad trip in Sevilla, Spain. Several of her answers to the protocol questions explained this trip greatly modified the way that she viewed herself as a language learner and the way that she approaches practice with the Spanish language. She shared that her immersion experience challenged her to consider her role within the Spanish-speaking world in addition to her connection to her own ethnic history. During the discussion of this topic, Janelle also spoke of how others underestimated her Spanish-speaking abilities as a result of her ethnicity. Nevertheless, she indicated that she utilized these stereotypes as motivation to succeed. This motivation led to her decision to be proactive about her education and seek help as soon as she recognized the need. Janelle further expressed that the Spanish program faculty members at her institution consistently encouraged her to persevere both academically and emotionally.
Case Three: Laila

Laila is a Black female in her senior year studying Spanish and English. At the time of the interview, she was beginning her fifth year of study at the undergraduate level. She is a nontraditional student in her mid-twenties who attended two other institutions prior to enrolling at WSSU. One college was a Predominantly White Institution and the other was a Women’s college. Since her enrollment at WSSU, she has taken advanced courses in the Spanish language to include: Spanish Composition and Grammar; Spanish Conversation and Pronunciation; Advanced Spanish Composition; and Survey of Latino Literature.

Laila attributed her initial interest in the Spanish language to her affinity for Latino culture and an expectation that it will provide numerous opportunities for travel and employment. Furthermore, she enjoys learning new concepts and discovering “a new world outside of English.” Although she has not yet studied abroad, she is very interested in doing so.

Many of the thoughts that Laila shared during her interview pertained to her emotional adjustment to college life and her ideas about herself as a language learner. Laila shared that although she likes to keep to herself, she does not experience any trouble starting conversations with strangers. Laila is the first person in her family to attend a four-year institution although she did mention that her mother is a Certified Nursing Assistant and her father earned an Associate’s degree. In many instances when Laila talked about interacting with Latinos, either in the community or through chance encounters, she identified that she is always aware of her ethnic identity. For Laila, the way in which society sees her and the way
in which the Spanish-speaking community perceives her heavily shape the way she sees herself as a Spanish language learner.

Laila also indicated that she often seeks opportunities to use the Spanish language in practical ways on a daily basis. This consistent practical application of Spanish primarily includes the use of technology and provides her with authentic contexts for language use. Similar to her peers, Laila also confided that the assistance she receives from her faculty members greatly impacted her language-learning success and decision to remain in the program.

**Case Four: Malcolm**

Malcolm is White male and is in his junior year of the Spanish undergraduate program. He plans to study Spanish in a country other than the United States in the near future. While enrolled at WSSU, Malcolm completed advanced courses such as: Spanish Composition and Grammar; Hispanic Civilization; Spanish Conversation and Pronunciation; Survey of Spanish-American Literature; and Survey of Latino Literature.

He explained that his interest in the Spanish language arose from his desire to become a translator and to interact with more persons in his role as a youth minister. He shared that he enjoys the opportunity to speak to persons he would otherwise have no way with which to communicate. He also enjoys learning about the cultures of Spanish-speaking countries.

Malcolm’s identity in the Spanish language learning process focused more on his socialization into the WSSU Spanish program than was described by the other participants. He explained in detail his affinity for technological resources when practicing Spanish
speaking and writing skills. He also stressed the importance of working with his peers and asking for help. Much of what Malcolm shared about his current behaviors in the program, what he hopes to do in the future as proficient Spanish speaker, and even how he interacts with his family centers on the idea of helping. Malcolm shared multiple examples of times when he either sought or provided help in the language acquisition process. Per his admission, a major component of Malcolm’s success in communicating in the Spanish language was also the result of the supportive academic and emotional environment provided by his Spanish language instructors at WSSU.

**Case Five: Renée**

Renée is a Black female and is in her sophomore year at WSSU. Her declared major is nursing and her minor is Spanish. Renée indicated that if she is not accepted into the nursing program, she will declare a major in Spanish. Renée received a rating of *Superior* on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview. This rating indicates that Renée is able to discuss a variety of issues in the context of formal and informal situations in Spanish. It also suggests that she is able to develop, explain, and create her own hypotheses. Renée has studied advanced Spanish language courses including Survey of Spanish Literature as well as Spanish Grammar and Composition.

Renée began her study of Spanish at the age of five when her parents enrolled her in a Spanish immersion elementary school program. She shared that because it has been a defining characteristic of her life for so long, it is natural to want to continue to study it and
improve her proficiency. She added that she enjoys the versatility of the language and the exposure she receives to a variety of cultures within the Spanish-speaking world.

Although Renée is the youngest participant in the study, she had the longest exposure to the Spanish language as a result of attending the majority of her grade school years in a Spanish-immersion educational program. She shared that although Spanish is not her native language, since she has spoken it for more than fifteen years, there are times when she feels as though she hovers between being a learner of language and being a heritage speaker learning about her language. One of the big motivational forces on Renée's persistence and her success in achieving proficiency is the influence of her parents. Interestingly Renee only shared the impact that faculty have made on her language learning when she was directly asked. Nevertheless, she often described the importance of collaboration with her Spanish program peers as a source of support in her study of the language. As Renee described her language learning experiences and the strategies she uses to achieve success in language learning, she frequently referenced the impact her early childhood Spanish education has had on her language proficiency.
CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. An exploratory collective case study was used to investigate the experiences and perceptions of five successful learners of Spanish at Winston-Salem State University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The emergent themes discussed in this chapter will answer the study’s three research questions:

1) What learning experiences and methods do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU perceive to be beneficial to the acquisition process?

2) How do the internal and external motivations of Spanish language learners at an HBCU influence their experiences in the language acquisition process?

3) In what ways do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU interact with the target culture or language?

Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model and Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework framed this study. By conducting within-case analyses of the data collected from a qualifying questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and letters of advice to potential students, specific details for each student case were identified. Following these analyses, three themes and nine related subthemes were uncovered (see Table 6). The three emergent themes related to all participants and their experiences as Spanish language learners at WSSU were:

1. Constructing Language Learners Selves: From Me to ‘Mí’ [Me]
2. Navigating the Path to Proficiency; and,

3. Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories.

### Table 6. Themes, Subthemes, Research Questions, and Descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Research Question Addressed</th>
<th>Brief Descriptors of Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Constructing Language Learners Selves: From Me to ‘Mi’</td>
<td>1A) Developing Language Learner Identities</td>
<td>RQ2 &amp; RQ3</td>
<td>Readjusting to academia: Nontraditional students, Ethnic awareness and cultural acceptance, Early language learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1B) Navigating Emotions</td>
<td>RQ2 &amp; RQ3</td>
<td>“I don’t feel like a student” Negotiating societal responses to language ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1C) Internal Motivation</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Developing confidence from challenge, Desire to help others, Envisioning future selves, Learning for learning’s sake: Growth mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1D) External Motivation</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>“I’m not some stereotype” Familial influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Navigating the Path to Proficiency</td>
<td>2A) Practical Application</td>
<td>RQ1 &amp; RQ3</td>
<td>Beneficial practice resources, Participation in Spanish and Latino culture, Practical use of the Spanish language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2B) Self-advocacy</td>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>Embracing mistakes, Seeking help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2C) Collaboration</td>
<td>RQ1 &amp; RQ2</td>
<td>Peer accountability, Informal peer support, Peer-to-peer instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories</td>
<td>3A) Academic Support</td>
<td>RQ1 &amp; RQ2</td>
<td>Reviewing foundational material, Supporting multiple learning styles, Providing tools for academic success, Encouraging ownership and creativity, Providing helpful feedback on assignments, Teaching culturally relevant topics, Helping students achieve their academic goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3B) Emotional Support</td>
<td>RQ1 &amp; RQ2</td>
<td>Talking us off the ledge: Encouragement to persist, Demonstrating faith in students’ abilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first theme emerging from the data, Constructing Language Learners Selves: From Me to ‘Mí,’ addressed the following four subthemes: 1) developing language learner identities, 2) navigating emotions, 3) internal motivation, and 4) external motivation. Within the context of this theme, participants described how their multiple identities and motivations shaped the way they perceive themselves as Spanish speakers and students. Participants also explained how the emotions evoked in response to societal pressures impacts the construction of their identity as Spanish language learners.

The subthemes included under the second major theme of the study, Navigating the Path to Proficiency, focus on the following: 1) practical application, 2) self-advocacy, and 3) collaboration. In relation to this theme, students described useful learning strategies they employ on a daily basis to improve their comfort and understanding of the Spanish language. They also highlight opportunities in which they interact with the Spanish language and associated cultures in authentic ways.

The final major theme of the study, the Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories, incorporates the following subthemes: 1) academic support and 2) emotional support. Participants noted that professors in their Spanish program support students’ successful acquisition of Spanish through the incorporation of good teaching practicing within the classroom. Nevertheless, it is the emotional support provided by informal mentoring relationships that participants credit as an indispensable component of their language learning success.
Table 6 presents a detailed description of each theme and the associated subthemes. In the following sections of this chapter, each theme and relevant subthemes will be explored through the incorporation of direct passages from the participant interviews and letters of advice. As the data suggested, although some of the subthemes occurred for only a few or one of the participants, they were described by the respective participants as important components of the students’ experiences.

**Constructing Language Learner Selves: From Me to ‘Mí’**

The participants in the current study described how their self-perceptions are fundamentally shaped by the multiple identities they embody and the emotions that are evoked by participating in society as Spanish speakers. Internal and external motivations experienced by the participants further contribute to the ways in which they perceive themselves as Spanish language learners. The following sections present these subthemes in detail.

**Developing Language Learner Identities**

The subtheme of identity in this study encompasses the perspectives—and in some cases, responsibilities—participants had prior to assuming the role of Spanish language learner. In varying degrees, the participants indicated how their previous identities either took precedence over or contributed to their current identity of a Spanish language student during their matriculation at WSSU. Stemming from their multiple perspectives, study participants shared their experiences in developing language learner identities through discussions of the following: readjusting to academic life as nontraditional students, developing awareness of
their ethnic identities as they participate in differing cultural contexts, and relying on early exposure to the Spanish language as a foundation for the present.

**Readjusting to academia: nontraditional students.** Eric noted that his age and previous work experience heavily shape the way he views himself as an undergraduate student and a Spanish language learner. He shared that his most profound observation regarding this transition is the way in which he is treated as a student in contrast to his interactions as a mechanic. While working as a mechanic, Eric was often expected to solve clients’ problems immediately, whether in person or on the phone. As he explained, these interactions were often hurried and stressful:

> Whether it was my fault or it happened at a different shop, it’s always you’re getting yelled at…As a mechanic, when I had to answer the phone, people are yelling at you because you don’t know everything.

In contrast, Eric shared that as a student, people are more understanding and are less likely to demand immediate solutions to their problems. He confided that it was initially difficult to adjust to the unexpected change in expectations.

> It just kind of feels weird for people to treat me nice after being a mechanic, because you’re usually getting yelled at because you ripped someone off or you broke this…So it was just weird to come here and people are like, ‘Oh hello! How are you?’ Or, ‘Do you need help?’ Or when I have to sit at the front desk, people are just like, ‘Oh, well it’s okay. I’ll call back another day.’
Eric likened his adjustment to life as an undergraduate student to that of the character Dorothy and her journey to another land:

I feel like I’m in Oz or something…with the yellow brick road and everybody’s nice and they don’t expect you to know anything and no one yells at you. It’s nice. It kind of feels like I’m being pulled out of reality and I’m in this innocent little bubble again. So, I don’t really know what I’m doing but I’m here and I’m learning.

It is this nice, low-demand environment that allows Eric the time to develop his proficiency in Spanish through volunteer activities, study abroad experiences, one-on-one meetings with his instructors, and collaborations with his classmates. Nevertheless, he recognizes that this period of his life is limited. Therefore, he challenges himself to enjoy the process so that he can, as he stated, “look back in ten years when people are yelling again,” and say, “Man, I remember that one time at Winston-Salem State, they said ask somebody else and they didn’t yell at me.”

**Ethnic awareness and cultural acceptance.** Furthermore, Eric indicated that his rural, austere upbringing also impacts the way in which he approaches the learning process, specifically with regard to how he interacts with his peers in the Spanish program. Eric is from Ohio and spent his childhood in Amish country where people were primarily motivated by duty rather than emotion. According to Eric, his family and community members rarely spoke about their feelings and placed great emphasis on fulfilling responsibilities.

They don’t speak too much and there’s not much talk about emotions and feelings and stuff. It’s just more about duties and work and getting things done. So I’m kind of
seeing now that I’m not a very sympathetic person or I’ve not always been because to me my mentality is like those are weird things to talk about. To say that you’re sad or depressed or whatever…that’s not anything I’ve ever heard for years of my life.

He realizes that this pragmatic perspective serves as a challenge in his role as a tutor and how he relates to his peers:

Maybe I’m a little bit cold sometimes. I’m trying to change that. We’re all trying to be better people. But, instead of telling people to not complain or just try harder, I’m like, ‘Okay, well what’s going on?’ And sometimes people have home issues or this or that or they just don’t have the confidence or know that they have the capabilities. And I’m just trying to be more open to those things. Like, ‘Yeah, you can do it!’ instead of saying, ‘Try harder!’

As a result of Eric’s self-reflection, he is actively working to be more sympathetic of the students with whom he works. He realizes that before he can begin assisting some people with grammar and conversational skills, there may be times in which he should first listen to their concerns. Although he indicated that this is a challenge for him, Eric believes that he is quickly adjusting to the norms of his new environment.

Janelle’s perception of identity as a Spanish language learner was distinctly influenced by her time spent in another country. She explained that while studying in Spain, she faced a crisis regarding her racial and ethnic identity. She often felt ostracized because she did not look like the vast majority of people with whom she was surrounded.
There also wasn't that many black people in Spain, and a lot of the European people wherever I went, they would always think I was African, like ask me to show my passport to them, because they just didn't believe I was from the States. At first, I used to be like, ‘Oh, man, I stick out like a sore thumb. I feel so lonely.’ People didn't really want to talk to me because of it.

This conflict was exacerbated by the fact that during her time abroad, Janelle became aware that she had only a minimal knowledge of her African heritage and the impact her culture has made throughout the world. She shared, “When I was in Spain, one of the things that I realized that made me upset was I don't really know much about myself or about African-American culture.” Nevertheless, she settled into her identity as a Spanish-speaker by choosing to be confident in her knowledge and taking advantage of her opportunities.

Then I was like, ‘No, I’m in Spain. I’ve got to enjoy the trip. Who knows when this will happen again?’ I did a lot of things on my own. Then when I did make friends, that was good.

Malcolm provided a unique perspective with regard to his identity as a language student at WSSU. Throughout his interview, Malcolm emphasized the importance his identity as an HBCU student and subsequently explained how this identity provided the foundation for his success in the study of Spanish.

I’m used to the majority of the people in the classes are you know Black and that’s what I’m used to. I guess it just makes the learning environment easier because you’re looking at people that you seem to be like, you seem to get along well because
you have similar interests. You can go outside of the classroom and do stuff together outside of the classroom. Whereas I feel like if it was a room full of 250 people that I didn’t get along with and the person I’m sitting beside, I don’t even know their name, I’m not going to ask them to help me with something. My learning would be hindered because I wouldn’t be able to have that conversation with the people. And if I didn’t know the professor, I wouldn’t be able to get help when I didn’t understand something. It would just be me fending for myself. So being able to be in that kind of environment where I can get along with people…it helps the learning and it enhances it.

It is this membership that motivates his decision to attend an HBCU for his undergraduate education. He explained his choice not to attend a predominantly White institution by first illustrating the types of student interactions he presumed would occur.

They’re going to think they’re better than everybody else. It’s going to be a class full of people that I don’t talk to. I’m not going to get along with anybody. I’m going to be seen with a small little group of Black people over there…I just can’t do it. I’ve got to go to an HBCU because I need to feel at home! I mean my high school was majority Black, my county overall…majority Black, so I’ve got to go somewhere where I know that I’m going to get what I need.

Malcolm shared that his decision to attend an HBCU was met with understanding by his parents and concern from relatives.
A lot of my family members were like, ‘Why?’ And well…not my parents. Now my parents understood because they know how I am and my mom is the same way. But you know other people like my grandma made a comment that she didn’t really mean to be negative, but she was like, ‘Well are you going to be safe?’

He described his grandmother’s reaction as being sincerely concerned for his wellbeing.

She was genuinely concerned. It wasn’t that she was trying to be rude or anything, but she was like, ‘It’s going to be a majority Black people. You might be the only White person in all of your classes. I don’t know how you’re going to feel. Are you going to be okay with that kind of thing?’

Contrarily, as he continued his explanation, Malcolm indicated that one of his high school teachers expressed blatant prejudice related to the quality of education she assumed he would receive from an HBCU.

I actually had a teacher that I almost cussed out. God bless her soul! Because she asked me if I was sure I wanted to go to an HBCU. Now her [student added emphasis] on the other hand was being extremely racist, unlike my grandma.

During his explanation, Malcolm asked me if I was familiar with the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program. When I shared that I was unfamiliar with the program, he continued,

Well it’s like a college-prep kind of thing. So we had to turn in our letters of where we got accepted to and we also had to give her our letters from when we got scholarships. So I gave her my letter for acceptance and she was like, ‘Okay cool. Put
When I brought her my full scholarship letter, she looks at it and goes, [student imitates a disgusted face] ‘Oh.’ I said, ‘And that’s where I’m going.’ And she goes, ‘Oh!’ I’m like, ‘What the…do you mean?!’ So she even pulled me out of class to talk to me because I was trying to get out of the program after that because I was so mad. And my mom was mad and went to the school and talked to her. She was like, ‘It’s too late for me to pull you out of the class…If you don’t do anymore work, that’s on you. I understand you didn’t really need the program anyway, but you were in it and that’s the end of it.’ And she was like, ‘Are you sure you really want to go to Winston-Salem State?’ ‘Yes, I’m sure! What the …do you mean am I sure?!’ I was so mad. And I mean, I’m not the type of person to get mad easily but I felt like if I’d been in this program for four years, I’m about to graduate high school, you should know me and know who I am and you should know [student added emphasis] that that’s best for me.

Despite the frustration Malcolm experienced from receiving these responses, he confided that his strong connection to a community of like-minded individuals aided him in remaining steadfast in his decision. In hindsight, he believes that his choice to attend an HBCU was well founded and has provided him with the kind of familiar and supportive environment that is ideal for his growth and success as a Spanish language student.

When I got here…I felt right at home. When I walk around campus, I don’t go, ‘Oh my gosh! I don’t see any White people.’ I’m like, ‘Hey! Black people!’ I feel at home. I feel like most people on campus, when they see me…they don’t see me as,
‘Hey it’s that White boy that doesn’t belong.’ They say, ‘Hey! How’re you doing?’ And they’ll keep going. Then I think a lot of the professors here are the same way. They don’t look at me differently. They don’t seem to think that it’s awkward that I’m here. I enjoy being here. They enjoy teaching me and that’s how it is.

**Early language learners.** Two of the study participants shared that they ground their identities as Spanish language students in the many years they have spent studying the language. Renée expressed that her use of the Spanish language from a young age provided the foundation for her identity as a Spanish language learner.

I've been learning Spanish since I was 5 through an immersion program. This immersion program, kindergarten through 12th grade, so it's all I've kind of known. Renée’s identity as an early learner of Spanish continues to impact her commitment to persist with language study. She pointed to her bilingual upbringing as the reason she chose Spanish as a minor.

For me to continue it on seemed like the ideal thing to do. I don't know necessarily what I would do if I don't have Spanish…didn't pursue Spanish. It'd probably be kind of awkward because I've spoken Spanish about every day.

Laila, like Renée, also indicated that her many years of studying the language contributed to how she identifies as a Spanish language learner.

It started from eighth grade, about ten years ago…I just fell in love with it in high school and I was like, ‘Well there’s nothing else I like. I’m passionate about this.’
Navigating Emotions

In the current study, participants expressed several emotions that contribute to how they perceive themselves as language learners. While many of these feelings resulted from decisions and actions initiated by the learners themselves, other emotions were in response to how other members of society responded to the discovery of the participants’ abilities to communicate in the Spanish language. The following sections describe how each student in the study negotiated these emotions as they pursued proficiency in the study of Spanish.

“I don’t feel like a student”. In his interview, Eric was the only participant who acknowledged a feeling similar to that of an imposter in his decision to study at WSSU. His fear was not directly related to the use of the Spanish language; rather, his age and previous work experience made him question the legitimacy of this choice to pursue a bachelor’s degree in his mid-twenties. Eric confessed that when he first began his studies at WSSU, he initially wrestled with feelings of inadequacy as a nontraditional student. According to Eric, he often felt as though he were an imposter when his instructors challenged him to complete difficult tasks.

Up until that point, I didn’t feel like a student or a college student. I felt like a diesel mechanic trying to take classes. I was trying to push a square into a round peg. Eric knew that he was capable of speaking the language, but was unsure as to whether he could perform academically at the level expected of him.

I worked with a lot of Colombians and Puerto Ricans…So I kind of picked up a lot just working with them. And I got as far as I could get as a mechanic without having
a degree. And so to move on, they told me to go get a Bachelor’s degree to continue
to get promoted…I found out I would actually be a lot better off just studying Spanish
because I kind of had a good grasp on it already.

For my level four Spanish class or level 4000, we had to write a 16 page paper. And I
had never written that much in English before, much less in Spanish, and most of the
things I had ever read in Spanish were just like short and sweet and to the point and
really probably weren’t more than 15 pages…It was two battles at once. Like here’s
Spanish and then also, here’s how to write a research paper.

He revealed, however, that by learning how to divide each assignment into manageable
chunks, he has grown more confident in his ability to complete these tasks:

It gave me a lot of confidence that I could write and I could really be a student…I was
kind of like, I can do this. I wrote a 20-page paper, so maybe I’m not just trying to
fake this, but I really could succeed in college.

By completing each assignment, Eric validated his membership within the Spanish-language
student community.

**Negotiating societal responses to language ability.** To further explore how students
felt about themselves as Spanish language learners, I inquired about the reactions they
receive when others discover their ability to speak Spanish. Eric indicated that he is
sometimes mistaken for a native Spanish speaker due to his distinct Argentine accent.

It kind of depends on who it is that is finding it out because around here, the majority
of the Spanish-speaking community is from Mexico, and the accent that I have is
really strong from Argentina. So they generally ask if I’m from Argentina or how long I’ve been here. And I say, ‘Well I’m American, but I lived in Argentina and Uruguay in that area and kind of have that accent.’ So they usually think it’s hilarious.

Renée also revealed that in addition to expressions of amazement, people often mistake her for a native Spanish speaker.

[People are] surprised. Shocked…Sometimes people can't guess what I am ethnicity-wise, so sometimes it's not a surprise because some people have assumed that I'm Hispanic or will approach me.

Malcolm, like Renée, cited that other people respond in various ways when they learn that he is able to speak Spanish.

I’ve gotten a variety of different responses. Sometimes, it’s more like, ‘Oh! Hablas español.’ [You speak Spanish.] Sometimes it’s like, ‘Why do you speak Spanish?’ And then the other times it’s like, ‘Oh we thought you were Latino anyway.’ And I’m like, ‘I’m not. I’m not Latino.’ So it’s a different variety. Because when I actually first came here and a lot of my classmates that came in with me, they all knew me …So they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re a Spanish major right?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah.’ They’re like, ‘Are you Latino?’ ‘No.’ ‘Oh you look like it.’ ‘Okay.’ [student made confused face] And then there’s the people who actually are Latino and they’re like, ‘Oh that’s so cool that you, you know, you want to be able to speak to us and stuff. And then there’s the ones that, ‘Don’t learn my language. I don’t want you to know.’
According to Laila, many people are similarly prone to mistaking her ethnicity.

Oh my goodness! It’s always when I’m in Wal-Mart and for some reason, people think I’m Latina. I don’t understand why. I’ve had people approach me and say, ‘Are you Hispanic?’ Or a Hispanic person will speak Spanish to me.

She noted that people are frequently stunned to learn that she is able to speak another language.

And then, a guy who used to work at McDonald’s, I had never seen him before. He came in there speaking Spanish to one of my coworkers and they were asking questions about me and I said, ‘I can understand everything you are saying.’ And his jaw dropped…This is funny. I like to speak Spanish to Hispanic people, like strangers. Like if I’m trying to say excuse me, I’ll speak it in Spanish and then they’ll stop and look astounded. And then one guy was like, “Oh your Spanish is so great! You’re proficient.”

Laila attributed this astonishment to her belief that people harbor negative stereotypes regarding people of African descent and their language-learning abilities.

Black people…we get bad flack about being unintelligent…A lot of people get surprised and think that Black people are stupid and don’t know any other languages.

And I’m very intelligent. So it shouldn’t be a surprise that I can speak something else.

Comparable to her peers, Janelle explained that other people are also surprised when they learn that she speaks Spanish. However, she was the only participant to indicate that she is asked to demonstrate her speaking abilities.
It’s always, ‘Oh my gosh, say something to me in Spanish,’ and I'm like, ‘That's just so awkward. You want me to just say, 'Hi, I'm Janelle,'” and they're like, ‘Yeah.’ Oh, okay.

Janelle also confided that others sometimes question her motives to study Spanish, usually as a result of their perceptions about the challenges of language study. She further explained that even people in the workforce are shocked to learn that she is able to speak the language proficiently.

Some people are like, ‘Why do you want to learn Spanish?’ I'm like, ‘Why not learn Spanish?’ They're like, ‘I've always thought it was hard.’ Some mixed reviews. A lot of times, even when I had gone on job interviews and I tell them, they're like, ‘Oh, you can speak Spanish? You can read, write, speak it fluently?’ I'm like, ‘Yeah, I can.’ They're just like, ‘Oh wow, that's awesome.’

I then asked the participants to explain how these reactions affect their self-perceptions. Eric expressed that, although he now considers himself more tolerant, the reactions he receives from others have not had a major impact on how he views himself as a learner and speaker of Spanish.

For me, how it makes me perceive myself…I would say maybe more open-minded.

I’m not really sure if it changed my perception of myself. I still feel the same. I feel like maybe I can relate to more people.

He also mentioned he grounds himself in the knowledge that speaking an additional language is not uncommon at the global level.
It’s never like too impressed. Some people will think you are a genius, because not many people speak two or three languages in this country. But meanwhile, everyone [student added emphasis] in Switzerland can speak a minimum of four and they’re not all geniuses. So, I just try to stay humble with that because it’s like, realistically it’s just like a parlor trick almost to some people.

Similarly, Renée shared that, despite reactions from others, she feels her ability to speak Spanish is not novel. She explained, “I'm among people, a lot of people, who can speak it. I'm just a piece of a bigger whole. That's how I see it.”

Unlike Eric and Renée, Laila expressed feelings of exacerbation regarding the prejudice and misconceptions pertaining to her gender, race, and language proficiency. She added that she receives satisfaction from challenging these stereotypes through the demonstration of her proficiency in the Spanish language.

I’m tired of being stereotyped and judged because of other people and I am proud to show my education…I like to prove people wrong a lot. I like to see astonishment on people’s faces…It’s nice to impress others and be viewed in a positive light and not some ghetto stereotype, ignorant Black woman stereotype.

Equally, Malcolm articulated frustrations with ethnicity-based discrimination. Like Laila, he felt fulfillment in challenging these prejudices through the use of the Spanish language. Malcolm diverges, however, by addressing how he feels about discrimination imposed upon members of the Latino community, rather than on himself.
I like when I could help people, like when I was volunteering at the dental clinic…A lot of the people were really rude. Like the woman that I was helping, she was like, ‘Oh lord, not another one that doesn’t speak English! Where’s the translator?’ And I’m like, ‘You don’t have to be like that.’ …I have a lot of issues with my family when we’re together, like family gatherings and they’re talking about people coming across the boarder, they need to go back home…I just find it really disrespectful and I’m like, even for the small percentage of people that may say, ‘Why do you want to know my language?’ there’s a far greater majority that are appreciative that I’m taking the time to learn the language so that I can be able to speak to them.

Janelle also shared that she feels satisfaction in her ability to help others after they learn she is able to speak Spanish.

Sometimes I'm like all this hard work is paying off because you need Spanish. Sometimes in your job, even if you don't think you do, you never know when someone will come in that needs help, and you feel like, ‘Man, I didn't do my job because I couldn't help this person.’ It always makes me feel really good. ‘Yeah, I know Spanish. Do you need help? I can help you’

**Internal Motivation**

The subtheme of internal motivation focuses on participants’ stated reasons for pursuing proficiency in the Spanish language. Several of the internal motivations identified in this study emerged from the first statement in each interview, “Help me understand what led you to study the Spanish language in college.” Through the course of their interviews, the
participants shared the following internal motivators: confidence developed from overcoming challenging tasks, a desire to help others through the use of the Spanish language, envisioning their future selves as proficient Spanish speakers, and the desire to learn for the sake of learning.

**Developing confidence from challenge.** While reflecting on how he views himself as a Spanish language learner, Malcolm expressed that he often develops confidence through the completion of challenging tasks. After writing a ten-page paper in Spanish for the first time, Malcolm realized the following:

> It kind of opened my mind to I can really do this. Like it’s not way far off in left field somewhere and I’m never going to be able to attain it. I’m getting closer, the more classes I go through, the more studying I do, the more practice and writing I do, it continues to get better…I can do this. I’m going to do this. I’m going to stop making excuses and I’m going to do it. And then being able to come to the completion of this 10-page paper is preparing me for next semester when I have to write a 25-page paper in Senior Seminar. So, it’s kind of just a domino effect.

Malcolm recognizes that in order to achieve his goal of proficiency in Spanish, he must reframe his thinking regarding his own linguistic abilities. He noted that the completion of assignments that originally seem difficult provides him with proof of his capacity to achieve. He is then able to reflect upon these accomplishments when he faces increasingly challenging tasks in more advanced courses.
Janelle recounted a similar experience as she reflected on her frustration with learning a challenging aspect of Spanish grammar. Because Spanish has many irregular verbs or some different verb tenses than English, I always go and I'll find time to just go back and try and look up irregular verbs, or ask myself ‘Do you know this? Do you know how to conjugate it?’ I'll make charts so I can constantly understand it, because I always feel so embarrassed when there's an irregular verb and I use the wrong conjugated form of the verb. So I just always go back and try and reinforce those irregular verbs and tenses.

When I asked Janelle how practicing this skillset impacted her level of comfort using the Spanish language, she explained:

I had this aha! light bulb moment about past tenses, and I was like, ‘They're the same, or at least they're the same in English.’ I don't understand the difference between these three past tense verb conjugate verb tenses. And then my professor explained it and I was like, ‘Oh wow!’ After that, I would constantly change it… ‘It's supposed to be this instead.’ It's like whenever I do get that clarity, it's like, yes!

**Desire to help others.** Among the study participants, Renée explained that one reason she chose to study Spanish was to assist others—particularly in her future profession as a nurse.

I’ve volunteered at a bunch of places. As far as a hospital was one. The first time I volunteered there, I put that down on my application… As far as career goals, I always wanted to do something in healthcare and nursing. Doing what I’ve done, since I was
small, and incorporating it into something I want to do just seemed like the right way to go.

Eric concurred with his colleague by explaining how his knowledge of the Spanish language helped provide a more welcoming environment for recent immigrants.

I guess starting like when way back it kind of helped after being in Puerto Rico when I was a teenager to come back to the States and see how we had a huge influx of immigration from Mexico, where kids were just getting dumped into our classes and they didn’t speak English. And sometimes just to say like the smallest thing that you can try to say to somebody makes them feel more welcome or less like a stranger or an intruder. So I think that sometimes I see people from like twelve years ago that I tried to say like, “Hola. ¿Cómo estás? ¿Te gusta de aquí?” [Hello. How are you? Do you like it here?] Just something simple, they still remember me from twelve years ago.

Malcolm also credited his desire to help others through the use of Spanish as his principal motivation to succeed in language study. He confided:

I just have a heart for helping people, which is one of the reasons why I wanted to major in Spanish, because I hate to see people not be able to talk to people and to be able to understand each other.

Malcolm attributed his commitment to assisting others to his role as a youth minister at a church in his hometown. He explained that the church leadership endeavors to expand its
ministry to the Latino community and plan to select Malcolm to spearhead the transition.

Regarding the pastor’s decision to appoint Malcolm to this leadership position, he shared:

He’s hoping for me to be able to either preach entirely in Spanish or to be able to translate for when he preaches in English and me translate into Spanish. So, Spanish people can come. They don’t have to know a word of English, but they’ll understand what is going on. That’s one of my really big hopes.

Malcolm acknowledged that his desire to satisfy what he believes is his life’s calling serves as internal motivation to reach a near-native level of proficiency in Spanish.

**Envisioning future selves.** Three of the study participants affirmed that imagining their future selves as proficient speakers of the Spanish language internally motivates them. For example, Laila indicated that she challenges herself to retain information during a new grammar or vocabulary lesson by imagining how she will use the material in her future professions as a librarian, legal translator, or medical translator.

I thought about becoming a translator…And everything I’ve learned has given me skills so I can translate in the court or hospital or travel abroad.

Malcolm shared a similar approach when studying new vocabulary with regard to his future as a translator:

I really think I could see myself doing this for the long term…translating, teaching, whatever I end up doing…We’ve been through certain vocabulary, when it connects with psychology, like learning the brain I’m like, ‘Oh, well I need to make sure I keep
this put over here and make sure I know how to say this, because it’s going to be important later on.’

Equally, Renée shared that her journey to Spanish proficiency is also motivated by her desire to use the language to communicate with more patients in her future career as a nurse. She explained that she always wanted to have a career in healthcare and that incorporating Spanish into her future plans seemed like a logical decision since it has been an integral component of a majority of her life.

I thought Spanish would be a good tool as far as trying to do nursing. I thought it would be a good idea. I've thought of when I get experience of nursing...Maybe a little company or something where you're helping translations with healthcare and having health professionals or being able to ... Some professions you can have contracts and whatnot, but kind of do it like that as far as bridging the gap as far as healthcare in general because there's quite a need. Trying to facilitate that need by having an organizational company that's whole objective is to bridge the gap or language barrier. That's what I thought about. It hasn't even started. It's starting as far as getting this certification and using it in the field in your future but it's something that I would like to do.

**Learning for learning’s sake: Growth mindset.** Learners who maintain a growth mindset believe that they are able to develop and improve their understanding over time through practice (Dweck, 1999, 2010). Within the context of the language classroom, this concept would most likely manifest through students seeking opportunities to improve their
linguistic and cultural knowledge rather than merely to receive a grade. Many participants also demonstrated their growth mindsets by expressing their desires to learn for the sake of learning as an incentive to persist with language study. As Laila described, she is naturally a studious person who loves to learn new things about people, ideas, and concepts. It is her inquisitive nature that causes her to question “Is there more?” It was this characteristic that inspired her request to develop a presentation regarding Afro-Latino women despite the fact that she would not receive any type of extra credit for her work.

It was about the female anatomy. Like Georgia O’Keefe used to paint about those vaginal flowers and things and the poem was called *Flor* [Flower]. And it’s about a woman’s sexual awakening. Like, Black women were objectified and put down. This woman actually took her…she’s self-autonomous now. And I love empowering women.

Laila expressed that the gratification resulting from being able to research a topic that resonated with her and then demonstrating her understanding provided her a much greater satisfaction. Similarly, both Malcolm and Eric agreed that the true measure of success academically is experiencing the learning process and progressing beyond your limits. Malcolm shared,

Especially in foreign language, it’s not necessarily about the grade you got on the exam, it was about whether or not you progressed. And if you showed progression and if you showed that you got better, you’re better than you were when you started
you’re more likely to get a A or B even if you got a D on one of your tests, because it’s about the progression.

Eric noted, however, that as a tutor he became aware that all students do not share this perspective.

I know that’s not for everybody…but I just want to learn, whether you give me a 70 at the end or a 105, if I feel like I’ve learned, personally, I feel fulfilled and the number isn’t going to affect me as a person. But for a lot of people, it can be very discouraging or even crushing. For someone to put hours and hours into a paper and they get a 55 and they never got any help or there’s really not any comments, you just got the 55 after 20 hours of work.

**External Motivation**

External motivation refers to the positive and negative influences that challenged participants to achieve success in the study of Spanish. Several study participants referenced their desire to discredit negative ethnic and racial stereotypes as expressed by members of society as external motivation to succeed. Furthermore, participants credited influences from their family members as being influential in their commitment to attain proficiency.

**Disproving misconceptions: “I’m not some stereotype”**. Among the five study participants, Laila, Janelle, and Renée indicated that they felt motivated to disprove existing stereotypes regarding women and African Americans in the study of languages. Laila shared her disdain of the negative portrayal of African-Americans and women with regard to academia and interest in language study.
Well being a woman of color, it’s a double negative. Society is always going to be against me—specifically as a woman…I don’t know about my gender, but for my race, it’s not the same thing over and over again…Everyone else at HBCUs study the same thing: mass com.; something with the gym…just generic things. There aren’t that many teachers. Well, not for people that want to learn Spanish

As a result, Laila dedicates herself to the study of Spanish in an attempt to discredit the dissenting voices. She expressed that she relishes the opportunities she is able to provide a counter narrative for these stereotypes and uses these instances as external motivation to excel in her study of the Spanish language.

I like to prove people wrong, and I love being unique…I don’t want to be like everyone else. I can be set apart from other people in my race…We’re not cookie cutter. One person doesn’t represent a race or a gender. We’re all different and it shows different facets…I’m not stuck in a box. I don’t like being put in a box. I don’t place others in boxes or label other people. It’s just very ignorant and annoying…unnecessary. I don’t like being tied down.

Likewise, Janelle reported a similar perspective as a result of her study abroad experience in Spain. She noted that the prejudice she experienced regarding her knowledge of the Spanish language was often related to the fact that she studies at an HBCU.

Specifically, she lamented that upon learning that she attended an HBCU, fellow English-speaking study abroad colleagues attempted to discredit her knowledge of the Spanish language and criticized the education they believed she was receiving. She recounted that,
upon learning of her institutional affiliation, fellow study abroad students insinuated that her education was therefore subpar.

When I was in Spain and students were like, ‘You're a Spanish major?’ I'm like, ‘Yeah,’ and they're like, ‘At what school?’ I'll say, ‘Winston-Salem State,’ and they're like, ‘What is that?’ Or ‘That's not a PWI,’ or they would just try to discredit me every chance they got, or try to cut me off and go, ‘Oh no, it's this way.’

Janelle expressed that the confidence instilled in her by her institution provided her with the conviction to retort:

Okay, if you're a Spanish major or you're learning Spanish, you know just like I know, learning the language is overwhelming and everybody learns a different way, so the same way that you use this way to say this phrase, I've been taught this way, and they're both equally right.

When I asked Janelle how this response made her feel, she admitted, “I think it motivates me a lot more, because I already know that people are going to think that my Spanish isn’t as good.” Janelle feels as though her race and ethnic identity are factors that cause others to discredit her ability to communicate in Spanish. She indicated that the threat of embodying this misconception serves as an external motivation to achieve her goals.

That's something I just had to come to terms with, so I feel like I always have to be on top of my game there. No excuses for anything, because they're going to expect you to have excuses. They're going to expect for you to not know things.
As Janelle expressed, it is this external motivation that drives her to attend every class meeting and to challenge herself to learn as much as she can in an effort to discredit the existing stereotype that African Americans and HBCU students are incapable of successfully learning another language. Consequently, in her letter of advice to a potential student, she warned of the discrimination the student may face as a result of these misconceptions and then stressed the advantages of choosing to study Spanish their institution.

If you're attending WSSU you should already be aware that people will judge you, your education and ultimately your degree. You see people think that HBCU's are less than creditable when in truth the education that you will receive is so profound it goes far beyond the classroom and into realms of what was once the unknown for you. You may feel uncomfortable at first but welcome your learning experience with an open mind. You'll think that because your department, World Languages and Culture, is so small it's [not creditable]. Lastly you may feel as if your ability to use your Spanish whether it be with reading, writing and or speaking is inadequate. I'm honored to be the one to break all of these fears and myths for you. Your historically Black college or university fought for the right to educate young gifted black minds when no one else would. It's steeped in a historically culture realm that so few receive the ability to receive it. Even though your department is small you must remember the advantages that come along with your territory. The advantages such as smaller classroom settings which means more one on one time with your
professors, you have professors that genuinely care about you and what you receive from them that you can use along with your degree.

Renée, similar to Laila and Janelle, expressed exasperation with some of the misconceptions regarding African Americans and the capacity to succeed in language study. Other minorities would drop the class because they felt pressured…I’ve heard from other people who have tried to pick up a language later or just in general that sometimes they feel intimidated by learning it or stressed. ‘I can’t do the work’ or ‘That’s too much work’ or ‘I’m not capable enough.’

Nevertheless, she admitted that she finds solace studying Spanish at WSSU. She believes that the environment provided by her HBCU, replete with supportive faculty, staff, and like-minded students, offers a safe space for her to challenge the stereotypes imposed upon her by society and thrive as a bilingual scholar.

Here, being at a place where people are capable, they are able to do big things and it's an environment that helps to take that stress off of you…You see people doing stuff. You see people doing this research or got nominated for this. It's praised upon…It's just the environment as a whole is very supportive…For me, this is an environment that, for the first time I felt comfortable in as far as school.

**Familial influence.** External motivations also manifested in the form of familial influence for three of the study participants. Renée and Laila divulged that their parents were the ones who decided to begin their study of the Spanish language at ages five and fourteen,
respectively. With regard to her mother’s opinion about her use of Spanish in the future, Renée joked,

‘When you come, when you work in the hospital, you better use your Spanish.’ She already told me. The thing is with my parents, it's the thing of they've always ... It's not even been a question of ... ‘You're going to utilize it!’

According to Renée, her parents’ decision to provide the majority of her education in Spanish offered her the linguistic foundation necessary to succeed as a Spanish language student in college. Nevertheless, she recalled her parents facing criticism from family and friends for choosing to expose her to the language at such a young age. Renée expressed that her parents’ commitment to providing her with an education immersed in the Spanish language, despite criticism from peers, is admirable and shows the depth of their concern for her intellectual growth. As she further explained, her parents’ dedication to her growth continues to be evident as they challenge her to be proactive about her education in college:

I have to give it to my parents because I was very shy. I don't want to do that. Making you go and go talk to the professor and call the professor. ‘You go set the time up with the professor. I'm just going to sit here. I'm going to make sure you do it, but I'm not going to do it for you.’

She understands that her parents are teaching her that although the apprehension of admitting mistakes and needing help may be great, she must continue to be an advocate for herself. As such, Renée shared that her primary strategy for success is self-advocacy.
Additionally, Laila and Malcolm shared that they challenge themselves to learn as much as they can so that they are able to share the knowledge they have with their native English speaking parents. Both students also indicated that their parents have invested financially in their study of Spanish at the collegiate level. For example, Malcolm expressed that he is especially motivated to use his *People en Español* subscription on a daily basis because it was a gift from his mother as an investment in his education. Malcolm joked that when his mother purchased the subscription, she warned, “If I pay this $15, you better read this magazine!” Despite their initial motivations to begin the study of the language, Renée, Malcolm, and Laila each credited the pride that their parents express regarding their Spanish-speaking ability as external motivation to achieve.

Laila explained that the way she views herself as a learner of the Spanish language is often shaped by how her parents respond to her efforts and abilities. She indicated that her father’s desire to see her become proficient in the language in order to use it in the professional world was a primary motivation to begin studying Spanish in the eighth grade.

Oh gosh, my dad made me study Spanish because he wanted me to get a great job. He wanted me to pick something in college that I’d actually find employment… My dad is the reason why I do this because he pushed me and he’s bought me a lot of things to help with Spanish.

Laila confided that her identity as a Spanish speaker represents the fulfillment of her parents’ dream and provides her with the confidence and determination to succeed in other areas of her life. She illustrated this sentiment when she described her mother’s reaction to the first
time she communicated with a native speaker in a public setting, “My mom’s never heard me speak Spanish. She was like, ‘Wow! I’m proud of you!’” Laila added that sharing her speaking abilities with her parents is a way in which she can help them to continue to bond as a family despite the fact that they are divorced.

My parents were young when I was born. So it’s not that big of an age gap. So we’re close…She gives me some confidence. Like it’s so nice when she doesn’t know something in Spanish, and I can incorporate what I’ve learned at school and bring it back. She’s like, ‘Oh my money…you’re showing what I paid for.’ So like with the person at State Farm at the stand at the fair downtown, she was so proud. She never heard me speak Spanish. So it’s pushed me to stop being so self-conscious about my skills and to just do it…My dad…he wants to learn Spanish too. It’s like we’re doing it together. All three of us are doing it. Though they’re divorced, we’re all still family.

**Navigating the Path to Proficiency**

During the course of the interviews study participants highlighted a variety of strategies that they use to achieve success in the study of Spanish. Participants further emphasized these strategies in their letters of advice to incoming Spanish language students. The data illustrated the most beneficial strategies for study participants as the following subthemes: practical application of the Spanish language, self-advocacy in the language learning process, and collaboration among peers.
Practical Application

The consistent application of knowledge in practical and authentic situations is an important part of adult learning (Knowles, 1970). In the study of Spanish at the collegiate level, the importance of practical opportunities to apply knowledge is no different. Participants in this investigation exemplified this ideal through the consistent use of learning resources in the form of print and technology. They also sought opportunities to exercise their knowledge of the Spanish language and associated cultures by participating in Spanish-speaking communities within the United States and abroad and by utilizing the language while at work or among their peers.

Beneficial practice resources. One learning strategy that Eric employs is the incorporation of Spanish in his everyday activities. He prefers to read the news and interesting articles in Spanish in addition to watching news broadcasts in Spanish. He also encourages incoming Spanish language students to use these resources as well. In Eric’s letter of advice to an incoming student, he advised:

My biggest recommendation is that you watch shows or the news in Spanish a few times a week. It’s overwhelming at first, but it really helps you adjust to hearing natives. I would also recommend that you try to read articles in Spanish once in a while. It really helped me improve my writing.

When Eric reads works in Spanish, he prefers authentic texts as opposed to American works translated into the Spanish language. He stated that reading Spanish texts aids him in understanding the mechanics and use of the written word.
I try to read as much as I can in Spanish…I don’t like to take an American work and then read it in Spanish. That’s not so enjoyable… I would say definitely reading *Latino America Boom* from Argentina and Uruguay. I really enjoyed it. I loved the twist endings and stuff like that and so I kind of just modeled my writing style after that to get the practicality and the professional side of it.

He further explained that reading literary works in Spanish assists him in differentiating between colloquial and academic speech. He shared:

I have a lot of friends from Uruguay and Argentina. For example, to say maybe they say *capaz*, which means *capable*, literally. And so if I’m writing something and I’m like…uh ‘capaz this will happen,’ that’s not grammatically correct and someone outside of that region won’t understand. So reading the books I’m like, ‘*tal vez*’ [perhaps]… and you kind of learn the efficient way of saying things.

Laila concurred that reading the written language, specifically in the form of fairy tales, is a beneficial learning practice. She believes that by utilizing stories with which she is already familiar, she is building new knowledge on the foundation of familiar content.

Reading fairy tales in Spanish…like translated. I’m wondering, ‘How does this sound?’ Because when I was in kindergarten we read the Three Little Bears, and I forgot about it. But to look at what words they use to substitute what we use is so nice… It’s like as a kid to adulthood, it’s engrained in your mind so you automatically know it and you’re just adding something new.
Laila also incorporates strategies that focus primarily on the practical application of grammar, vocabulary, and cultural information. For Laila, this often means seeking out ways to communicate in the Spanish language through the use of technological resources. In the following excerpt, she explained how her habit of frequenting YouTube, a video-based social media website, became a means by which she makes Spanish relevant in her life:

I love makeup and stuff, so it used to intimidate me to watch it in Spanish because I have to learn to get away from looking at words. So it’s helped me with my auditory. And I love watching tutorials. I do it because it’s fun. It helps me with my day to day. It helps me learn about the cultures. If I were to travel, I would be able to relate to the locals and things like that. I can incorporate it with my life.

In addition to YouTube, Laila shared that she also utilizes the smart phone application Univisión to stream Spanish television programming on her device. Furthermore, she reads news articles using the website Yahoo! En español and enjoys various genres of literature written in Spanish.

Laila’s use of language-learning strategies is not limited to reading and viewing information. She explained that she also practices by communicating in Spanish when connecting with friends on social media sites such as Facebook and through the use of text messaging. Laila strongly believes that consistent meaningful practice aids in the development of language proficiency and encourages incoming students to frequently seek opportunities in which they can practice this skill.
If you don’t use it everyday or frequently, you’ll forget. So it’s like when we have winter break or summer break, I’ll lose a lot of information. So it’s like a constant thing. Like I have to watch *Univisión*. I have to watch things on television and DVDs in Spanish. I have to do that!

Laila also shared the importance of consistent practice in her letter of advice to an incoming Spanish language student.

In order to become fully fluent you must practice quite frequently which means that you must make yourself accustomed to hearing Spanish on a daily basis rather than relying on visualizations (i.e., reading subtitles, etc.) in addition to speaking to yourself (this may seem strange and you may look silly doing so, but it is very helpful) or another individual.

Malcolm also reported using a variety of technological resources to aid in the development of his knowledge of the Spanish language. He stated that in high school he used Spanish language websites designed to track students’ progress while helping them improve their proficiency.

From high school, we did some game websites like spanishspanish.com, I think it is, or spanishspanishspanish…whichever. And then some reference website and then my high school actually had a subscription to some website. I don’t remember the name of it. But you could go in and keep track of where you were and how your proficiency was building. So when I got to college, I continued to use those websites to help me. Like flash card games.
These resources proved to be so beneficial that in his letter of advice to a potential student, Malcolm stressed the importance of spending time outside of class practicing grammar and vocabulary through the use of interesting and interactive websites.

A major key to surviving in the classes is to study and practice outside of the classroom. I find playing language games on the Internet and practicing speaking with my friends helps me… The school also has a subscription to Mango languages. This website can be helpful when practicing as well.

Malcolm also utilizes his Kindle each day to read issues of People Magazine en Español [in Spanish]. He explained:

I really practice reading the articles. A lot of times, I’ll just be like, ‘So…I know what this word, this word, this word is. Let me look up a couple of these words.’ But then it adds to vocabulary. You know, having to look up the words, I’m like, ‘Okay, I know what this is.’

He explained that he must find practical ways to incorporate the Spanish language in his everyday life in order to improve his communication skills.

I really need to do something outside of the classroom because just the classroom isn’t going to be enough. And if I really want to be proficient, I’m going to have to practice outside of the classroom.

In agreement with her peers, Renée cited frequent practical application of Spanish as an invaluable strategy for improving proficiency.
We do weekly blogs. They’ve been helpful…Writing, repetition, it’s been more helpful because you see the words, you see the articles that go with what. If you constantly get it wrong you start to pick it up. Maybe let’s do the right article this time. As far as that, you actually see it with the written language or in your writing. If you’re seeing that you just can’t get this part right you go and you look it up…I feel like I’m improving with writing, which is where I felt I was kind of weak.

**Participation in Spanish and Latino culture.** The study participants also described practical applications of their knowledge within Spanish-speaking communities. Some of these interactions occurred within their campus, while others transpired in their local communities or during immersion experiences abroad. For example, Janelle and Laila agreed that several of their encounters with the target culture involved interactions with Latino communities in Winston-Salem. Janelle stated:

> We've been to salsa events. We've been to networking events to meet Spanish speakers. They have an entire African-American Spanish community in Winston-Salem, and we went to work with the community.

Laila explained that participation in the Spanish-speaking community encourages her and her peers to explore their chosen field of study from the perspectives of those who live within it and helps them develop an appreciation for the diversity within the population.

> We had a Latino appreciation event in September. I think it was in downtown Winston-Salem…And it immersed me in the culture…It makes me appreciate life. When you learn about other countries and what they’re dealing with just by simply
starting off by learning their language, you get a glimpse into their world. And it just broadens my perspective.

Renée also articulated an appreciation for her introduction to the diversity of Spanish-speaking communities when she reflected on her educational experience in a K-12 Spanish immersion program:

I've been blessed to meet a whole bunch of people. A whole bunch of instructors from all over the place that have given me an outlook that Spanish is bigger than the language. It's more of a culture. I had a professor from Spain and Mexico, Honduras, a lot of places, and seeing the dialects have just made it like this is neat. I can take a piece of what they taught me and what they brought to the table about themselves and given me an outlook on Spanish as a whole really.

She further expressed that by sharing their experiences during their interactions, her native Spanish-speaking instructors invited her and her peers to see the world from their point of view. Renée believed that this act of inclusion offered her a perspective with regard to the Spanish-speaking world that is difficult to extract just by listening to media or learning from a textbook.

What they brought to the table is the cultural aspects and views on ... They're teaching us on part of their inner circle. I don't know how to explain it. It's interesting and it's like you're given a perspective that not many people know about. You hear all this listening to the news and all this stuff but you really just don't know. They're people, they just speak a different language. You're given a very big, kind of sneak peak into
something that you can either take that sneak peak and keep going about your business or really involve yourself in and try to explore more.

Likewise, Eric shared that his experience immersed within Spanish-speaking communities abroad and during his employment as a mechanic provided the context he needed to appreciate Latino culture. He shared:

It just really became real and it wasn’t just like people on TV anymore. It was like, these are real people that want to spend time with you and do good things and you just…you see it in a more real light than just, ‘Oh this is just words of Spanish and somewhere way, way, far away there’s people that talk like this, and it kind of took it from that and made it real. And just being around the people, I think, and getting sucked into their lives kind of made me appreciate it a little bit more.

**Practical use of the Spanish language.** In addition to students’ experiences with the target culture, the study participants highlighted on-the-job communication and discussions in Spanish with their peers as the most beneficial and most practical applications of the Spanish language. Eric began the description of his experience with the Spanish language by explaining that the majority of his coworkers as a mechanic were primarily Spanish speakers from Colombia and Puerto Rico. He also recounted how his ability to speak the Spanish language aided him in helping his customers:

We would get truck drivers who would have driven all the way from Mexico, and it was like their first stop in North Carolina, and they don’t speak a lick of English and they couldn’t communicate with anybody even if they dreamed about it. So that saves
so much time and effort and just like, ‘Oh you’re a life saver,’ being able to communicate with these people that are like coming in and they’re tired and they don’t speak any English.

Janelle also used her Spanish-speaking abilities on the job in order to assist others. She shared that while working as an instructor for an independent school, she was frequently called upon to communicate with the non-English speaking parents of many of the Latino children. She shared:

When they come to parent meetings, it would be difficult because they wouldn't really understand our English, or we would be talking too fast, and I would step in and try to help out as much as I could.

Laila described similar experiences while working at McDonald’s:

There are a couple of employees that can’t speak English or are very limited English and there are customers who are having a hard time. So I’ve used my skills to help the customer and speak to the other employees to help them.

In line with the other study participants, Malcolm and Renée reflected the use of Spanish to assist others while on the job in both religious ministry and health care, respectively. Renée offered:

I was working like day surgery or something. People were coming in. Somebody was coming in there for a surgery and needed help with filling out the documents and stuff. They're like, ‘We can't get the translator on the line.’ They needed the surgery like, now.
Malcolm shared the following regarding his willingness to use the Spanish language during his employment at a dental office despite his insecurities:

I was signing people as they came up. I checked their name off and I called the next person when they were ready for the next person. I don’t remember what my title was. But anyway, people were steadily coming that were Hispanic and most of the times, they didn’t speak very much English. So, they would be like, ‘Well this person needs a translator for you to be able to understand what they’re saying.’ And I would be like, ‘I might [student added emphasis] be able to. Stand there for a second. If I need help, I’ll get it. But if I can speak, I might be able to do this.’ So, what I could do, I did. I’d tell them they could have a seat, tell them what their number was, that kind of thing…easy stuff that I definitely knew how to say. If it was anything asking about like the work they were getting done to their teeth, I was like, ‘Where’s the translator? Because I don’t know how to say any of this stuff in Spanish.’ Like root canal. I don’t know how to say it.

Supplemental to Spanish language communication associated with their jobs, participants acknowledged that they seek opportunities to converse in Spanish with their peers and strangers in a more informal context. During Renée’s interview, she specifically encouraged the oral use of Spanish with other speakers of the language as often as possible. Renée explained:
It helps with the fluidity of it, not necessarily second guessing yourself. Just like with English you talk everyday so you get used to it. Just more ease. It's not; maybe this is how you say it, maybe not. The fluidity of it is better.

Eric echoed Renée’s advice and provided a helpful context for understanding the importance of authentic communication with Spanish-speakers as opposed to contrived scenarios often used in Spanish classes:

I would almost say that the little fixed conversations that come in the CDs with your book are just…they’re impractical. The accents which sound so forced and the rhythm is not a natural rhythm. It’s not like, ‘Do you want to go to the store?’ It’s like, ‘Do you want to go to the stoooooore?’ [student added emphasis] And you’re like, ‘What’s up with this fake accent thing?’ So, I don’t really care for those…It was kind of real to me before I ever got to go to school so I kind of came here with the mentality of I need to learn how to communicate with people. There’s a lot of things that maybe a book will tell you is important, but then in reality you never see it. And you’ve just got to be practical.

Eric also expounded upon an instance in which he directly interacted with the Spanish language outside of the traditional classroom. He explained that while he studied in Uruguay, he lived with persons from Mexico and Spain and often had to explain the meaning of words that one member of the household used to the others. He provided as an example:

So they’d be like, ‘So what does güero [a fair-skinned person] mean, and why did they say agua [water] is there, and what is salado [salted]?’ And I’m like, ‘Well in
Mexico it means this, then that means in Uruguay this.’ So, you never know where it’s going to help.

In this case, Eric found himself relying on his knowledge of linguistic structures, region-specific idioms, and slang in order to clarify communication among native Spanish speakers from differing countries.

Laila admitted that she also enjoys engaging individuals in conversation who may appear to be Spanish speakers.

Maybe if a guy is attractive, I can speak Spanish to him and see how he’ll react, because it sometimes helps [student laughs]. It does. It impresses them. I’m not trying to. I don’t assume every Hispanic person speaks Spanish. But I’ll say like a basic word like *hola* [hello] and see what the person will say and we’ll go from there.

She then expressed how her knowledge of the Spanish language was able to help a stranger in need of assistance.

This guy was asking my mom for directions. Like, he was from Mexico I think and he didn’t really…he wanted a good recommendation. He didn’t know where he was going. We were downtown and she was struggling. So I kept throwing words to her to help him. What I should have done was take over and speak to him, but I just coached her and he got to where he wanted to be. We were in the car, and we were trying to find a place to park and he was on the sidewalk and he approached us…He was asking for a place to eat and other places.
Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy traditionally refers to the act of intentionally seeking assistance to meet one’s needs as it pertains to persons with disabilities and women’s rights (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Wade, 2001). However, in the context of this study, participants indicated following similar steps to fulfill their language learning needs. This section will focus more closely on the study findings as they relate to how students enhance their understanding of the Spanish language by first acknowledging their shortcomings and then actively seeking assistance to improve them.

Embracing mistakes. One of the primary strategies that Eric employs is embracing his mistakes and seeking opportunities to practice the skillsets that he finds challenging. He noted that what is important is, “not being afraid of the mistakes and being able to laugh at yourself because you are going to say some bad things once in a while and not know it.” Eric believes in this strategy so fully that in his letter of advice to an incoming student he shared, “Don’t be afraid to make mistakes when speaking or writing. It’s a process and mistakes are an important part of learning.” Eric believes that by not taking himself seriously he is less apprehensive to communicate in Spanish, which has contributed to his advanced ability to use the language.

Eric further explained that he employed this tactic in an attempt to improve his writing skills in Spanish.
For me, I don’t even care speaking and listening, but I get really nervous writing. I almost feel like I should be writing really formal and in English too. So I get a little bit worriesome and I over-think it and I worry. Although he finds writing to be a challenging task, by actively seeking feedback, he is intentionally working to improve this area of weakness.

I’m always the first person to tell somebody that I don’t understand. I don’t know if I even given them a chance to ask if I don’t understand because I’m just immediately, ‘I don’t get this’ or ‘I don’t agree with this’ or ‘I don’t like it’ or ‘It doesn’t make sense.’ So that’s just me. I kind of make it a two-way thing instead of somebody just like talking to me. If I don’t understand I say, ‘Hey I don’t understand.’ As a result of using this approach, Eric’s instructor provided him with the steps he needed to overcome his writing challenge.

I think that was the most helpful thing. The teacher gave me that advice to summarize the book, then write a short summary on each character, and then talk about the themes, and then after all of that, talk about what it was you saw, and that was kind of like your thesis so to speak. And lay out your evidence and maybe go look at some professional written papers and look at those and see how that ties in. And then it was like before I knew it, I had 20 pages.

Furthermore, he shared that the confidence he gains from his improvement prepares him to complete more challenging assignments throughout the program.
I can’t think of one where it’s not like a mountain you have to climb. Every assignment feels like Mt. Everest. Which is good. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. You’re like, ‘Whoa, I climbed Mt. Everest.’ And then you’re like, ‘Oh, just kidding. There’s another one over here.’

**Seeking help.** Janelle highlighted that taking ownership of her education by being proactive and seeking help when necessary was an indispensable component of her learning experience.

I’ve always had this strange feeling that my Spanish is inadequate, so whenever I get an opportunity to try and use it, even though I’m scared, I know this is something I want to do. I want to perfect this craft…People will correct you because they want you to do better. They want you to succeed in the craft. No that I’m back [from Spain], I’m just like, ‘Oh, I know this,’ or ‘I’m trying to learn this,’ or ‘I’m okay if I said this wrong. Can you help me with this?’

Janelle understands that she learns best through repetition and participating in an interactive learning environment. Therefore, she often makes her concerns known to her instructors and offers suggestions on topics and activities to be incorporated during the semester:

We’re always like, ‘Oh hey, we found this online. Can we play this game in class?’ Or ‘Can you find a way to incorporate this so that we’re learning from listenings but it’s a game, or we’re watching a movie doing something kind of fun?’
Similarly, Renée chooses and encourages other students to actively seek help from peers and instructors whenever necessary. She explained that her advocacy with regard to her undergraduate education actually began in high school.

I was emailing my senior year in high school. I was emailing the chair over here about I want a minor, I'm interested in, or what steps do I need to take or what tests do I need to take, I have this much experience in Spanish, and stuff like that. I wasn't afraid of reaching out.

Renée’s hands-on approach to her education continues by seeking assistance from her instructors as soon as she notices shortcomings in her academic performance. She stated:

It's never been a thing of them having to come find me. Most of the time I'm very proactive in ‘You saw my paper, you graded it, what do I need to do to not get this anymore.’ I've always been kind of proactive. I never had a problem as far as, in college, as far as a professor having to ... I've just been proactive. I never really thought about them. I've gone to them.

According to Renée, students should seek assistance and voice their concerns when they are unclear about the content they study. She emphasized this sentiment in the letter of advice she wrote to a potential incoming student when she advised:

If you decide to attend Winston Salem State, you will have ample resources available to you. It is just a thing of pursuing them. The most important resources that would help anyone taking Spanish are the professors, students, and the Spanish Club.
Renée believes that some instructors often maintain the idea that students know what they are talking about or that the material they present is easily understood because they do not receive feedback to the contrary.

Some professors, I don't know what it is, but some just have the notion or idea that I know what you're talking about. Like, because you wrote it out and you said this is how it is and you think it's clear or you think because it's basic terminology that I understand what you're saying. It's kind of misguided. Again, you can't assume everybody's done what you've done or done what is supposed to be, or understood it, or done it like you expect them.

She described that by being their own advocates, students ensure that they receive the tools necessary for their success.

**Collaboration**

The subtheme collaboration emerged from the data through participants’ descriptions of how they work with one another in order to learn about the Spanish language and culture. Students shared that these collaborations often occurred in the form of structured systems of accountability and informal peer support. They also alluded to teaching one another by transforming confusing content into student-friendly lessons. Participants credited peer collaborations as beneficial practices for overcoming challenges, improving proficiency, and persisting in the Spanish program.

**Peer accountability.** Eric explained that when he began his study of Spanish at WSSU, there was a system in place in which students supported one another by holding each
other accountable for their assignments. In this arrangement, students would meet twice a week in the morning to talk about the presentations each individual was assigned in their respective Spanish classes.

It was kind of like accountability to your peers almost. It’s like you’re coming in on Tuesday, you were assigned it on Friday, you want to have some sort of results so you can at least have something to show to everybody else for Tuesday. And then for Thursday, you pretty much better have it done and then Friday we’re going to present.

He stated that this relationship was especially helpful because the members of the group who were further along in the program mentored the newer students regarding faculty expectations and provided them advice regarding how to succeed.

I got here like the second semester that this was officially a department of the school and they had a system in the works already and I just got pulled into it. But basically, they all got together and would talk in the mornings like once or twice a week and talk about each person’s presentation. Because, we had to do presentations almost every week for one Spanish class…So, it’s just kind of like accountability where people would say, ‘You’re kind of slacking and you really need to have something on Thursday’ or ‘This doesn’t look right. I think that’s a spelling error.’ And just kind of like helping but also constructive criticism between the group for our presentations. So I came in doing really good presentations, because they had already had a system of knowing what the teachers were looking for and what they aren’t.
Eric articulated his disappointment that this program ended after the upperclassmen in the group graduated, but expressed interest in reviving it to assist current and incoming students.

All those guys have graduated now, but I really miss that…But here come this next semester we’re going to have to get it back in place because well I have Spanish seminar and everybody’s [student added emphasis] going to have to pitch in to help everybody, I think.

**Informal peer support.** Malcolm also relies on the relationships he has with his peers in the Spanish program as a resource for improving his proficiency. He shared his colleagues’ sentiments regarding the high expectations set by the faculty members in the department and indicated that these high expectations often manifest into lengthy, detailed assignments.

Well I know that composition class…last semester when it was taught, the page length was 15 pages. And that was per the Chair of the Department, because when he taught the class, it was 15-20 pages…Everybody was really stressed out about it. They were having difficulties getting to 15 pages. They got to 10, 11, 12 and they were freaking out because they couldn’t get to 15 pages. And if you didn’t have 15, you failed the class…It’s difficult to write a bunch of pages about a short story. Especially some of the stories that people have are just a paragraph long. So to write 10 pages is even stretching it. To go to 15-20 pages is really stretching it.

When faced with these tasks, Malcolm believes that he learns best by collaborating with his peers, seeking their help, and providing assistance when he can.
It’s a unique experience of having each other’s backs. I know you, you know me.

We’re going to help each other get through this 10-page paper. You know if you have a question, I’m here to help you.

Malcolm shared that, on assignments in which he is allowed to work with classmates, he offers his help as much as he can.

Most times I try to help as much as I can if it, you know, if it’s allowed. Because of course, sometimes it’s like, ‘No. They need to answer the question themselves.’ So you just have to sit there and watch them struggle. It’s like that sometimes. But I mean, if you don’t understand something she’ll tell you you can ask your classmates for help or she’ll ask if anybody can help you. So I mean if that arises, then if I know the answer or if I can help them find the answer. And then a lot of times, if we’re doing worksheets and things in class, most [student added emphasis] of the time we’re able to have partners. So we can help each other find the answers and it moves a lot faster that way than just one person looking at it. But during like presentations and things, a lot of times, just the way we are because we’re such a small group of people and we all know each other, if somebody messes up with something…Like for instance the presentation I just came from. For some reason I couldn’t remember how to say 14. So they told me how to say 14 and I was like, ‘Gracias’ [thank you] And my mind just went blank. I was like, ‘mil novecientos [1900]…umm umm umm’ And they were like, ‘catorce’ [fourteen] ‘Thank you.’
He explained that, by providing assistance to a classmate in need, he is lowering the anxiety level often associated with language study.

But I mean we just have that kind of relationship. We’re not going to sit there and laugh at each other because you forgot something. Especially in that kind of setting because you’re already nervous. Half the time you don’t know what the heck you’re talking about when it’s a literature class. You’re trying to make it make sense.

Likewise, Renée shared that she developed most of the relationships she has with her classmates through the act of supporting and working with one another when faced with difficult tasks.

When we were struggling. We really got to know each other when we were all in the same boat. That's honestly, I feel like the program is kind of small anyway. The people you meet in the higher level in passing and in there too are the people you see in all your classes. It's a thing in that you come across each other. It's like, there's only eight of you anyways. You get to know your classmates, and especially when you're struggling. You're struggling together. It's a unifying thing. A support system.

**Peer-to-peer instruction.** Eric and Janelle pointed to teaching as a way of collaborating with their peers by providing help. These teaching experiences occurred in a variety of contexts ranging from tutoring sessions to serving as guest lecturers in the courses in which they were enrolled. Eric articulated that in his role as a tutor, he often takes liberties in deciding how to teach certain grammatical topics. He explained that he does not always
agree with the format and order in which information is presented in textbooks and believes that they may further confuse students learning the language.

I’m the Spanish tutor this semester, so I get a lot of time with the kids that come in for tutoring. And I kind of get to help them with the things that I don’t necessarily agree with in the book that I feel like is not clear or can be misleading. Or sometimes they put two things in the same chapter that maybe have no business being in the same chapter. So, I kind of get to teach it my way, for just a few people, you know. But that’s my little piece of giving back.

He described that he uses his understanding of the mechanics of Spanish in order to reformat lessons in a way in which concepts build upon one another in what he believes is a more logical format.

Janelle expressed a similar sentiment regarding restructuring content when I asked her to consider how she assists classmates that she notices are struggling. She shared that professors regularly teach information in what they consider the simplest manner. However, she confided that instructors are not consistently aware of the difficulty experienced by students as they attempt to grasp new concepts.

I always try and explain it from my perspective, because I think sometimes when professors explain things, even though to them it's the simplest way, I'm like it's the simplest form for you [student added emphasis] to understand, but you also have a doctorate in Spanish, so then I try to explain it in the simplest forms that I can, or look at it from a different way.
In Janelle’s interview, she further explained how she collaborates with her peers by offering learning resources she finds helpful in studying Spanish.

We had these workbooks, I guess you can say, and it had information about how to write grammar, punctuation, commas, things like that that you should use every day in writing that people misuse because they feel like it's the same in English and in Spanish… I was like, ‘Well I can give you guys this workbook, because it’s very helpful and it’s free.’ So I’m making copies for everyone in the class.

Janelle explained that after discussing these learning strategies with one of her instructors, she received an invitation to present on the compositions and grammar techniques she learned in Spain. She exclaimed, “I was so excited. I’m being a teacher’s assistant next week! It made me feel really good.” This opportunity to share with her peers further challenged Janelle to ensure her understanding of the material.

**Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories**

The final major theme emerging from the data pertained to the role of faculty in the participants’ successful study of Spanish at WSSU. Just as participants’ peers, families, and societal interactions influenced their experiences, faculty members also impacted students’ paths to proficiency. Representations of the subthemes of academic and emotional support from faculty surfaced in a majority of the responses from each participant. The participants shared that they believe their instructors deeply care about their growth as students and as human beings. It is this combination to which participants ascribe a large portion of their success in the program. As such, many of the descriptions of faculty influence on
participants’ language learning success incorporate elements of the previously discussed themes and subthemes. However, due to the prevalence of reported instances of faculty influence, the following sections will address this theme and related subthemes, individually.

**Academic Support**

The most common explanation of faculty influence on student success that existed in the data was in the form of academic support. This subtheme manifested in the following ways: reviewing foundational material learned in lower levels of Spanish study, acknowledgment of multiple learning styles, the provision of tools and strategies for academic success, and encouraging ownership and creativity in the classroom. Participants also highlighted the importance of receiving helpful feedback, the instruction of culturally relevant topics, and faculty members’ affinity for helping students achieve their goals.

**Reviewing foundational material.** Eric attributes much of his success in studying the Spanish language to the faculty at his institution. A quality that has made a strong impact on his choice to study Spanish was the concern that faculty members have in ensuring that students understand course content. One instance in which this is evident is when an instructor reviewed English and Spanish verb tenses during the first class meetings of the semester.

The teacher kind of took a step back and gave us like a day of English class almost where we didn’t even talk about Spanish. We were just like, ‘these are these things and this is’...it’s application in English and then from there out, she started making connections between the verb tenses and what they are in English.
He added that by revisiting students’ prior exposure to Spanish grammar, the instructor reinforced concepts that may have been forgotten over time or were never fully understood. I’ve seen this same thing but in a few different classes with different teachers is that sometimes they have to take a step back because they look at their little outline and say you’re in this class so you should already have these things memorized or you’re in that class, you should already understand these fundamentals and be able to use subjunctive and future progressive and whatever else because that’s what some outline says. But not all these kids can do it. So I think in every class, the teacher has to readjust and kind of take a step back and almost do review.

He believes that one reason for this issue is the disconnect between American students’ use of English and their familiarity with the mechanics of the language.

Here in the States, we don’t know English very well and, that is, we speak it, we communicate well, but we don’t know that present indicative is. We don’t know what conditional is. We don’t know these names. And then we come into Spanish, and they say, ‘Okay, present progressive. You’ve known this your whole life, you learned this in kindergarten.’ And then I just feel like they’re being condescending. Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. But that name, I don’t recognize it. You know, so they kind of have to take a step back and teach you, ‘Okay, this is present indicative in English…I run. I jump. I skip. I laugh. And I think that’s the thing. You could blame it on like our English, or you could blame it on there’s not a strong enough connection between taking your base in English and converting it into whatever language…The
terminology can be scary and confusing. And I always see teachers have to take a step back and explain what these terms are.

Eric believes that when instructors take the opportunity to reinforce these connections, they remove unnecessary, yet common, obstacles in the development of language proficiency. Students are then able to use this understanding to improve upon more advanced communication skills.

That made the difference between me saying, ‘This is stupid and I’m not going to take another Spanish class’ to me becoming a Spanish major, I think. So it’s sometimes important to relate the subject to a familiar thing for the kid. Because we’ve all got to be able to relate, because the unknown is terrifying. Create those bridges between what you know and what you don’t know, but give me that security blanket so I don’t get scared.

**Supporting multiple learning styles.** Several of the participants mentioned that their instructors’ attention to their preferred learning styles contributed positively to their experiences in the Spanish program. Janelle and Malcolm pointed to one instructor’s recordings of native Spanish-speaking friends as audio samples for listening activities.

I like when we had listenings that were actual native speakers. I'm not even sure how my professor would get them, but she would have native speakers that she knew in Winston-Salem for some of our recordings, and it helped because every different Spanish country has a different accent. They use different types of vocabulary, so you learn new words. Some people say, ‘Oh, you can learn this accent. This'll be so much
easier,’ but it helps us because, first of all, you can’t tell them, ‘Hey, we need you to slow down, because it's a voice recording, so you really have to listen, and it teaches you how even if you don't understand every single thing they say, you can use your context clues from words that you know that we've learned in class. You kind of piece together what they've said, so you can form some type of understanding. Even though during the test I'm like, ‘Man, this is annoying,’ it really, really does help.

Malcolm stressed that the use of native speakers in audio activities helps students acclimate themselves to the various accents and tones used by Spanish speakers.

It makes you focus on what is important, what do I understand even if I don’t understand every word, what did I get out of it, if anything. Sometimes I’m just like, ‘So all I heard was hola [hello]’ [student laughs]…It helps. Especially a lot of the recordings aren’t someone that is learning Spanish as a second language. It’s somebody that already spoke the language. So there’s that organic accent. It’s true so it makes you really practice listening. So then when you go out in the real world, you’re not just hearing somebody speak to you as if you’re in the classroom. They’re really trying to carry on a conversation. So you get that aspect of the real accent, the real dialect, what it actually sounds like, not just what your teacher sounds like.

**Providing tools for academic success.** The participants highlighted the provision of tips on how to succeed as another beneficial teaching method. Many students described how instructors used assignments that gradually build in length and skill application in order to teach students how to break challenging tasks into manageable chunks. Janelle noted:
We would have to do compositions every week, and sometimes I was just laughing about it. These are 250 words. This is easy. But then I realized, they're 250 or 350 words because it's preparing us to get ready for this Spanish senior seminar class or this 25-page paper. Because working with an assignment that's on such a smaller scale, it gives you time to focus on the grammar and punctuation, little things that are different for Spanish than it would be in English. Those helped, even though at first I was like this is pointless.

Equally, Eric explained how one instructor helped students accomplish the task of writing their first 15-page paper in Spanish by dividing the work in a step-wise process.

We kind of got taken baby steps. I could see where it was painful for the teacher, but she got is there. It wasn’t pretty, and I think it probably took some years off her life but she got us there and we all turned in minimum 15 page papers. Yeah, I swear it took a year off her life! She just started us out on side notes where, ‘Okay, write me a ten sentence paragraph, and then now write me two paragraphs, and then write me a page, and then write me two pages.’ And then she helped break down the paper, because none of us really in any class had ever written such a long paper before.

Malcolm also shared that the instructor provided a variety of resources to assist students in completing the assignment.

She gave more direction about what to include…She had a librarian come in about finding sources…She really tried to go the extra mile to make sure we had what we needed and that it was reachable and attainable.
While referring to the same assignment, Laila and Renée stressed the role of the instructor as a guide and encourager during the writing process. By offering helpful tips and reassurance, the instructor provided the participants a supportive, low-anxiety environment in which to improve their linguistic skills.

This semester the instructor gave us a choice between eight short stories and we had to write a 10-15 page paper entirely in Spanish. It was an explicative paper and it intimidated me. I was like, ‘I really don’t want to do this. I had just transferred and I don’t want to jump into things like that.’ But I met with her, and I was starting to fall behind, but she kept pushing me and when I would mess up, she would give me input. So she was always there along the journey.

Renée confirmed the positive impact her instructor’s guidance had during the writing process as well.

I’ve always had problems with writing. One instructor really just was like, ‘This is what a thesis is and this is how you put it in your intro. Your thesis needs to tell what your paper is about and tell me what you’re going to talk about.’ Which was very helpful…In the last year, I have improved significantly with my writing.

**Encouraging ownership and creativity.** Furthermore, Janelle and Laila discussed how one instructor supported their developing understanding of the language and culture through the creation and implementation of their own lessons. Janelle stated:

She has me preparing a presentation comparing the compositions I did in Spain and in the States and the grammar techniques that I learned over there…That means I have
to go back and make sure that I mastered this concept, because I can't get up there and explain it to them wrong. So it's helping me learn even more so that I don't forget it.

Laila explained that her professors’ desire to see her succeed is evident in their investment in her interests and the development of her understanding. She noted how one of her instructors encouraged her to exceed the expectations of a literary analysis activity that was of particular interest to her:

> We’re taking an African diaspora class with women writers in Latin America…So she had assigned us poems to explicate. We didn’t have to do a presentation...I asked to do extra work and do a presentation. Because when I get passionate about something, I have to do it… I believe that you shouldn’t have to hold back with what you want to say and what you believe in.

Laila credited her instructor with providing her an opportunity to develop both her understanding of the topic and confidence in herself as a learner:

> She let me present my ideas, even though some of my peers looked like they didn’t care. I care. I don’t care if they don’t care. I’m going to do it anyway because it matters to me, and she loved it. I didn’t get extra credit. I just did it for my own satisfaction. So it made me feel great. I could actually channel my energy, and it’s not stunted. No one’s telling me, ‘Oh you can’t do this.’

Both students expressed that the ability to take ownership of their knowledge and share it with their classmates challenged them to ensure their understanding of the material and reinforced their confidence in this understanding.
By providing Janelle and Laila the opportunity to develop and share their own interpretations of the topic, their instructor gave them the platform by which they could demonstrate a true understanding of the content through the transfer of knowledge and the act of creation. Malcolm concurred that by allowing students to take ownership of their work, instructors encourage student interest and challenge students to share responsibility in the learning process.

Being able to come up with some stuff ourselves and not everything being given to us helps us stay motivated to continue to want to do it. Because I know for a lot of majors, when it’s just down their throat, down your throat, down your throat, it’s like, ‘So…I’m just going to walk out the door because this is boring.’ It keeps you engaged. It makes you want to continue to do it and I think in the end it really helps your grade to be able to have a say-so in it…It gives you more of a sense of you had something to do about your grade. And you were able to make a change to it instead of, ‘Well the teacher gave me this. I didn’t understand that so I just failed.’ It was, ‘Well I got to choose it, so if I failed, that was my fault.’

**Providing helpful feedback.** Malcolm also believes that faculty play a critical role in his development as a Spanish speaker. One characteristic he greatly appreciates is the Spanish faculty’s affinity for providing prompt and meaningful feedback. He explained that when he completes an assignment, such as an oral presentation, he values receiving feedback as soon as he finishes his delivery. Malcolm believes that prompt feedback in this manner
makes it easier to understand exactly what the instructor means and leaves less room for misinterpretations.

When we send in stuff in Word documents, they use the comments on Word documents. So it shows up on the little side and you can click on the comment and see what they said. I think that works really well for writing assignments because they can highlight exactly what it is, put what they got to say about it, and then it’s easy for you to go back and fix it. For oral presentations and things that we’re doing orally, I think it’s best to get it as soon as you’re done to have them make comments. Because, I feel like if they write comments and then you read what they said, it’s hard to understand what part they were talking about, what exactly you had said, what they meant by something. It’s easier if they tell you face-to-face right after you’re done or maybe a meeting the next day, but still face-to-face so they can tell you exactly what they meant and it’s not written and you’re left trying to figure out what the heck you did wrong.

Additionally, Malcolm feels that the feedback he receives from his instructors is especially meaningful because they have close relationships and are invested in him as a student. He shared examples of the comments instructors offer when they notice his performance deviates from their expectations:

‘You failed that. You usually don’t fail that. What was going on?’ Or you know, ‘You usually do really good at this, but this time you didn’t do so good.’ Or, ‘This time you
just went way over what you normally do so what did I do right? What can I do again to make sure you do that again?’

Malcolm then provided an example of the benefits of the personalized feedback he received throughout the semester-long process of writing a final paper in Spanish.

Throughout the whole semester, we’ve been submitting small parts. We started with the brainstorming, and now we’ve worked our way up to where we’re about to submit the final ten pages. We did a rough draft a couple of weeks ago, first. And edits were made to it. So we can go in and change it before we turn it in for the final grade. So being able to see those errors and say, ‘Okay, well next time I know not to say this this way.’ Or ‘If I leave out a preposition, next time I know I need to include the preposition.’ Or ‘I included it, but in this case I don’t need it. Next time don’t include it with that.’ And for me, I struggle with tenses a lot. Using the right tense kills me sometimes. I use that tense correctly, but I didn’t use the right one. So it’s like, ‘Okay, in this particular sentence I need to make sure that next time if I’m saying something like this to use the opposite tense.’ I mean it helps to be able to see it firsthand. I wrote this. It’s something that I wrote, not just something that was handed to me to fix. It’s something that I wrote, and now I know next time to make this better…It’s just that kind of relationship really helps to continue to progress and it’s not like I’m just sitting here and I don’t understand and nobody’s helping me. No, she’s going to help you and she’s going to make sure you understand what’s going on so you can do work to the best of your ability.
Malcolm believes that the personalized feedback that he receives is a direct result of the environment in which he has chosen to study and the relationships that tend to exist in such a small setting:

I really think that had a lot to do with being, you know, on this type of campus because it is a smaller campus and of course because it is a HBCU. It’s not 250 people in a class and so you can have a one-on-one type of relationship.

Rooted in his own experience, Malcolm encourages students who choose this field of study to take the opportunity to establish these relationships with their instructors and to actively seek their assistance whenever they encounter a problem.

It is also important to get to know your professors. Let them know if you having problems with a concept or assignment. Our professors in the program do what they can to help the students.

Renée also believes that feedback from instructors plays an important role in student success. She attributed the helpful feedback from her instructors to being an integral part of her growth as a language learner:

I feel like the instructors here do pretty well as far as giving you feedback on how you're doing and ‘this isn't right.’ Or, ‘this is where we're going but you're not there yet.’ I think they do a good job of trying to facilitate and support you to guide you in the right direction. Some are a little tough but they mean well and ultimately want you to understand, not just get through the class.
It is this feedback that Renée cited as being a contributing factor to the improvements she is making with regard to writing in Spanish.

**Teaching culturally relevant topics.** The participants also stressed that the inclusion of Afrocentric perspectives in the instruction of language and literature enriched their understanding of Spanish and Latino cultures while simultaneously heightening their interest in the study of Spanish. Janelle expressed that the inclusion of topics such as Afro-Latino communities in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other Spanish-speaking countries taught her historical and cultural information of which many people are unaware.

This Afro-Hispanic Masterpieces of Literature class that I'm in right now, we're focusing on slave trade and the beginning of slavery and how there are African-American communities in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, or in every Spanish-speaking country and explain the dispersion of African-American slaves and how they are communities everywhere. I think it's a really good start. We're going from the very, very beginning and now we're going to hear their thoughts about African-Americans in the Hispanic community…When we got to class, a lot of people were like, ‘What is this class even going to be about?’ I said, ‘I'm pretty sure it's going to be about, I guess, African-Americans that have Hispanic origins or that have lived in a country for so long that they are from there but they have moved to the Americas,’ and they were just like, ‘What? That's a thing?’

As a result of her cultural experience in Spain, Janelle became aware of her lack of knowledge regarding her own heritage. Through the study of persons of African descent in
Latino history, Janelle found a way to learn about the history of her people from a new perspective and was able to use that knowledge to enlighten others about elements of their own history.

I was talking to this girl that is Dominican, and I met her through one of my friends. It was really weird to me, because this girl, was telling me, ‘Oh yeah, I know this about this culture.’ But then she was telling me that she was upset because my friend was telling her that there are African-Dominicans. And the girl was just like, ‘We are not African.’ And then my friend was trying to explain to her why there was such a huge African-Dominican population. And this girl just swore up and down. She's like, ‘No!’ like it was a bad thing, though. I was just explaining to her, ‘Well, I don't know fully all the information, but from what I've learned in class, even Costa Ricans have an African-American population because of how slavery started, and the dispersal of slaves around the world. But it was just really funny to me, because this girl just swore up and down that she didn't know that there was this population, and that people were just saying that.

Laila concurred with Janelle’s observation and similarly emphasized that the Afrocentric curriculum helped her relate to the content as a result of a shared ancestry.

We just had an elective course about Black women writers in Latin America. And I knew that there were people of African descent but I just thought they were so miniscule that no one really cared. It’s a large population. I just found out that Brazil in the entire world has the largest African population outside of Africa. And it makes
me feel great! Going to an HBCU of course my race matters and my race already contributes but in this branch. So I’m a Black person learning Spanish. I actually have something to show for it. It’s like, my people did contribute.

Renée and Malcolm both shared that the Spanish program not only introduced students to the knowledge of Afro-Latino communities, but also changed their perspectives on *Latinidad*, or what it means to be Latino, by providing counter narratives to those typically projected by governments and in the media. When I asked Renée to explain how her instructors address the topic of under-represented populations and their relation to the Spanish-speaking world, she divulged:

One of the Spanish instructors taught this Afro-Mexican class. I never really thought about it. It was talking about in Mexico that the slave trade did hit the coast and some people were left in Mexico. He was talking about populations in Mexico that mixed with indigenous people and how there's a subset of culture there and different people who are mixed with African decent and stuff like this, which you don't really think about, but it's very plausible. You don't normally think about it like, you have blacks…That was the first time I ever thought about mixing the combination of cultures and cultural similarities and things that I never had even thought to put together. That was interesting...We read about people who referred to themselves as black descendants and identifying how they identify themselves. It was interesting. It really was. And then that survey of literature class…We had to do biographies on the writers and they would normally identify or for some reason they would identify
themselves where they were from. The short stories or the poems or whatever they wrote, gave us insight of how they identified themselves.

She then explained that learning about Latino people of African descent expanded her understanding of the diversity of the Spanish-speaking world.

It changed my insight as far as just thinking that it was specific to one region and one group. Sometimes you feel like because you're put in these programs that you're unique, but when in all actuality there's people that have done it before you. Looking at it from a cultural aspect and how people have been blended and over that, it's something that's been around. But to me, I'm thinking this is the first time. No, we’re just kind of late with it. Me and Spanish is kind of...It just kind of made me see it as more global than just one single experience restricted to me.

When I similarly asked Malcolm to describe the instruction of under-represented populations in his Spanish courses, he mentioned that they are not included as often as he thought they should be.

In literature classes, we talked a lot about the way women have been treated in past years and we talked about slavery in Latin America and stuff like that. But that’s probably the most has been in literature classes. Other than that, in regular classes, I don’t think it’s really…Well in Hispanic Civilizations, we talked about it because of course we talked about conquistadores [conquerors] coming and taking over the empires and how they were treated. But in other classes I don’t think it’s really pushed to the forefront. Maybe kind of in the background. But other than that, I don’t
really think so. Now I do know that next semester we’re taking a Black Presence in Latin America Literature class. So I’m pretty sure that will be really interesting because we’ll be focusing on a minority. So that will be fun.

As he reflected on how the incorporation of these perspectives shaped his opinions about studying Spanish, Malcolm noted that it highlights an interesting comparison between race relations in the United States and the rest of the Spanish-speaking world.

One thing it does is it really shows the similarities between things that the United States has done or been through or imposed on other people and the same kind of thing is happening in Latin America. And it’s not really cool at all the things that happened, but it’s interesting to see the parallels and the similarities between the different countries and the way different things were going on. And then in Latin America, you see all of the revolutions. The revolutions started here and then one started here and here and then before you know it, twenty revolutions started taking place at one time. You know it’s interesting to see those kinds of things.

He also urged a more consistent inclusion of this topic throughout the university curricula—specifically because Winston Salem State University is an HBCU.

But I think especially being here on this campus, it would probably be nice to see more of what was going on in Black Latin America. What were they doing? Because this is an HBCU and you always want to have that undergirding of what it means to be at an HBCU. So I think it there could be a little more of that element added. Which I think next semester with that literature class, it will probably help that. But I think it
should go across all classes no matter what class you’re in, you should get that element of ‘well this is what happened with them.’

Eric’s unique perspective informed by his extensive time studying abroad in South America and the Caribbean also portrayed a slightly different outlook than most of the participants. Despite Eric’s appreciation for the support he receives from faculty, he does experience frustration resulting from what he views as a Eurocentric curriculum in the Spanish program. He lamented:

It just kind of feels like it’s just some generic agenda that we have at this school. I don’t know if it’s the school or the state or the whole country or what, but you just get this view from Spanish that’s like I would say from Spain and it doesn’t really take into consideration other voices. I feel like we could do more with Guinea Equatorial, which is the Spanish-speaking country in Africa. You never hear about them. You know, it’s almost invisible. And it’s really hard to get information about there and also the Caribbean. That’s kind of a forgotten spot. And Central America…they kind of get forgotten.

Eric feels that these silenced voices are especially evident as a result of his experiences studying abroad and interacting with the Latino community. He explains that he was initially discouraged from continuing his study of Spanish because the norms and history of peninsular Spain were the primary focus and Latin American culture and literature were relegated to a subcategory, if addressed at all:
I had one teacher that was really critical because I was learning…or I had already learned Spanish from the Americas and not from Europe. And it was a lot of, ‘Oh you’re saying this wrong. You’re doing that wrong.’ Which it wasn’t wrong. It was different and ironically, maybe even more applicable because I’m in the United States, not [Europe].

Eric’s frustration with the limited amount of cultural perspectives presented in the Spanish classroom originally discouraged him from continuing his studies in Spanish. He believes that if the program can incorporate more study of the Spanish language in the Americas, more students would be attracted to the major.

At first it made me the opposite of attracted. It made me like un-attracted to Spanish classes because I kind of felt like here I had it in the real world, I knew real people from Puerto Rico and Mexico and Uruguay and Argentina, and I really like it and I go to these classes and they tell me all that’s wrong because that’s not what they do in Spain. It just made it like boring because I got so tired of Spain. I don’t really have the Europe-is-the-center-of-the-world mentality. I was more interested in what’s going on here. And it’s hard to get that view. So I would say, if you could incorporate more of the Americas into Spanish curriculum, people would like it a lot more.

Notwithstanding his irritation with the Spain-centered curriculum, Eric expressed his excitement and hope for the future of the Spanish program:

But in our defense, I would say we have some really good classes about African diaspora literature and the Americas including one that’s in Latin America that I’m
taking now. And it’s a great class. But it’s ironically not in Spanish or in the Spanish curriculum. It’s more for communication and English majors. But it’s a great class. And I think that we could…we’re on the right track. I’ll say that. We’re on the right track and we’re on the cutting edge of it. Probably in five years it’ll be a big chunk of the curriculum, I hope.

Eric cautioned that in order to maximize on this opportunity, faculty members must assign equal value to the study of Latin American norms, linguistic styles, and literature as they do to those originating from Spain.

**Helping students achieve their goals.** Janelle also explained how her instructors’ support is evident as they assist students in achieving their personal, educational, and career goals. She illustrated this factor by explaining how her advisor challenged her to create a study abroad checklist. The list included action items that Janelle needed to complete in order to organize her semester-long trip to Spain. Her advisor then posted the list in the department’s main office and encouraged other faculty members to question Janelle regarding her progress in completing each task.

They kept telling me, ‘Now, did you do this? What about your checklist? I see this isn't checked off on your checklist.’ They even made me put up my checklist in the department major’s office, and they always go by and check it. Before class, they'll be like, ‘Oh, what are you doing today?’ I'm like, ‘Oh, nothing. After this class I'm finished. I'm going to go sleep,’ and they're like, ‘Oh, that's funny, because your checklist still has this not checked off, and you could be going to do that.’
Janelle mentioned that faculty’s persistence in holding her accountable for completing the necessary steps to study abroad encouraged her to reach her goal.

I wanted it so bad, and my professors knew that I wanted it so bad. So everyone, not even just the teachers in the World Languages and Cultures Department, but the other professors, and the entire building was always like, ‘Oh, so-and-so told me you’re going abroad. Can I help with this? Can I help?’ I’m just like, ‘I have to go not. I have to get this checklist finished, and now they all think I’m going.’

Furthermore, Janelle shared how her instructor volunteered to assist her with the process of directly enrolling in a Latin American university.

As soon as I told her, she sent me a list of universities that she's worked with, and she's called me to her office. I'm going to meet with her after class today to call them and set up the application stuff and figure out how I can pay for the application. But she's constantly, constantly helping me.

Renée explained that faculty members in the Spanish program at WSSU also invest their time and energy into assisting students as they prepare for careers utilizing the Spanish language. When discussing the preparations she is making to become a bilingual nurse, Renée shared the following:

They'll try to work with me, facilitate, like coordinating with the hospital or something to where I could learn about the language but also be in an environment that I want to work in and be able to utilize it. That's been a suggestion and that's been something I’ve thought about.
She described how local hospitals contact the department in an attempt to recruit assistance from individuals who are able to speak Spanish in order to better serve their patients. For Renée, witnessing how hospitals actively seek assistance from Spanish-speakers and receiving support from her instructors to meet these needs allows her to envision her future self as a bilingual healthcare provider and motivates her to succeed.

**Emotional Support**

This final subtheme addresses a key component of participants’ success in the study of Spanish at their institution. By the admission of each student, the emotional support provided by their instructors proved to be the determining factor in their decision to persist in the language program. Participants confided that their instructors offered encouragement through informal mentoring inside and outside of the classroom and reported that their professors also established personal relationships with each of them. The study participants also noted that, most importantly, the instructors’ demonstration of confidence in their students inspired them to believe in themselves and their abilities to achieve proficiency.

**Talking us off the ledge: Encouragement to persist.** While Laila described instances in which faculty members also encouraged her to meet academic goals, she confided that the advice they offered during personal conversations about her emotional health made the biggest impact on her experience.

Our relationship is beyond professor-student. It’s like you can…it’s not an intimidating situation. Even if I mess up a few assignments or miss assignments, I’m
still given a second chance. I don’t feel like it’s set in stone and I’m a failure. There’s always hope.

She acknowledged that her professors’ warmth and approachability are qualities that encouraged her to remain in the program during the times in which she wanted to quit.

Janelle also attributes part of her success in becoming proficient in Spanish to the support she receives from various faculty members. She described an instance in which she received encouraging advice to persist when she considered ending her study of Spanish:

I’ve had times where I’m just like I don’t want to be a Spanish major anymore. This is not for me. She’s always like, ‘Because this one assignment is hard, do not give up all that hard work.’ The professors are so supportive.

**Demonstrating faith in students’ abilities.** In line with a similar desire to please her parents, Laila appreciates knowing that her professors think highly of her as a student and believe in her potential:

It makes me feel like, you know, I can actually be successful in my future if a professor thinks that I fit on the high standards and I can make this happen. It makes me feel special. At times I feel like I’m a failure with certain things. And I have a love-hate relationship with Spanish. Sometimes I want to quit and give up because it aggravates me at times. It’s done it since high school. And knowing that I’m the top student or, you know, of high regard, I can actually stick with this.

She does not feel intimidated when she seeks their assistance because she believes they genuinely want to see her succeed in the various facets of her life.
As Malcolm described, this mentorship-type relationship provides students the motivation to believe in their abilities and progress in the language acquisition process:

I even had a conversation with one of the professors, and she was like, ‘You know, this isn’t way beyond your control. This isn’t way out of your reach. You can do this because I know the type of student you are. I know you’re a Chancellor’s Scholar, you’re smart, you’re intelligent, you can do this, you just need to sit down and get it done.’ So, it was really, ‘Okay, you know, she’s right. I can do this.’

Eric shared a similar perspective when I asked him to describe qualities of his most influential Spanish instructor.

I think it was the personal relationship. They looked at each student individually and this teacher knows about the person as a student but also as a person. If they are talkative if they’re shy, if they don’t like Mondays, if they’re thinking about something else on Friday. It’s a teacher that pays close attention to people. I think that makes a difference.

When I inquired about how this instructor impacted his success, Eric expressed that the confidence the instructor has in his abilities encourages him to believe in capacity to succeed.

I think just having maybe the faith in me. I don’t think many people really put faith in others maybe like they could. Just after endless classes of elementary school, middle school, high school, and then on into college, it’s just formalities…So, I think that was nice to kind of have a relationship with that person and in return that person has
Kind of faith in you. And it almost gives you like a license to really see what you can do, because this person thinks you can. So why not try?

Similarly, Janelle acknowledges that the relationships she has with faculty members at WSSU serve as indispensable resources in her educational and personal growth. She noted that the concern her instructors have for her proficiency and confidence in using the Spanish language was a major determining factor in her decision to persist with the language program in college. She summarized these feelings of gratitude in the following manner:

I have received a home and family aside from my family and home that's supportive and offers me constant support that is so profound it's not found in books, but in experiences. I know to humble myself because of the opportunities laid before me could have been for someone else, but with my hard work and dedication instilled in me by my department I've been favored.

Chapter Summary

Understanding the perspectives of students who successfully learn Spanish at HBCUs is an integral component in the improvement of Spanish language instruction at these institutions. This chapter highlighted the three salient themes and nine subthemes from the interviews and letters of advice provided by five successful Spanish language learners at Winston-Salem State University. The three major themes were: 1) Constructing Language Learner Selves: From Me to ‘Mí’ 2) Navigating the Path to Proficiency, and 3) the Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories in the acquisition process.
The study findings provide a model for student success at this HBCU and suggest that the self-perceptions of successful Spanish language students are shaped by a variety of factors. For some participants, their identities as nontraditional students, members of specific ethnic groups, and early exposure to the language, at times, took precedence over their identities as Spanish language learners. Many participants also shared that these identities also provided them with unique opportunities to engage with the Spanish language and adapt to their roles as Spanish language students. Participants also expressed that negotiating emotions evoked by internal and external motivational forces—such as positive and negative societal responses to their abilities to communicate in the Spanish language—challenged them to persist in their studies.

In relation to strategies study participants utilize to achieve success, common methods included the use of technological resources such as Spanish language practice websites, news broadcasts, and social media sites. Students also stressed the importance of interacting in the target language with peers, native speakers, and the community. Furthermore, participants indicated that advocating for one’s language learning needs is an important strategy to achieve success. They shared a common belief that instructors are sometimes unaware of the needs of all students, and the responsibility of seeking assistance belongs primarily to the student who needs help. The study participants also explained the importance of collaboration among peers in order to provide support within a community of learners.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of faculty support in the language acquisition process. A majority of the data gleaned from student interviews illustrated
effective ways in which faculty members engaged students in the classroom. Some of these good teaching practices included: reviewing previously learned material, teaching to multiple learning styles, providing prompt and meaningful feedback, and supporting students’ interests and creativity. Participants also stressed the importance of developing personal relationships with faculty members and recognizing their belief in students’ potentials.

In the next chapter I will discuss the research findings in relation to the current body of literature. I will also provide practical implications and recommendations for future research regarding Spanish language acquisition. The recommendations in this study are of particular interest for Spanish language programs at historically Black colleges and universities.
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this collective case study was to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. More precisely, three research questions guided this study.

1) What learning experiences and methods do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU perceive to be beneficial to the acquisition process?

2) How do the internal and external motivations of Spanish language learners at an HBCU influence their experiences in the language acquisition process?

3) In what ways do successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU interact with the target culture or language?

Findings of the study were associated with the following salient themes, which aided in understanding participants’ experiences in the Spanish-language acquisition process: 1) Constructing Language Learner Selves: From Me to ‘Mí’, 2) Navigating the Path to Proficiency, and 3) the Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories. Rooted in the findings represented by the three emergent themes, I present the following discussion, conclusions, implications, and recommendations regarding how HBCUs can structure their Spanish-language programs to better support the success of their students and improve the rates of language proficiency.
Discussion of Key Findings

Constructing Language Learner Selves: From Me to ‘Mí’

The beliefs that language learners maintain about themselves has the potential to positively or negatively affect the language acquisition process (Cotterall, 2005). The data from the current study validated this assumption and indicated that, in the case of the five participants, students’ perceptions of themselves as language learners ultimately contributed to their success in achieving proficiency in Spanish. During the interview process, students described issues such as the various ways in which they identified themselves, emotional responses to a variety of stimuli, and the internal and external motivations encountered in their study of the Spanish language. The exploration of these facets is important in that they interact with one another in the development of language learner identities (Dörnyei, 2003, 2005, 2009; Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

**Developing language learner identities.** Recent language learning research suggests that language learners construct learner identities from a variety of perspectives to include: personalities, motivations, aspirations, and learning styles (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Congruent with the literature, participants in the current study supported this multifaceted development of language learner identities. One factor contributing to the identities constructed by some of the study participants was their status as nontraditional students.

Eric and Laila’s accounts of their readjustment to academic life demonstrated that their initial concerns mainly pertained to academic achievement rather than seeking interactions with their peers. For many nontraditional students, acclamation to academic life
takes precedence over social integration (Bean & Metzner, 1985). As the students
familiarized themselves with the new responsibilities and challenges of their identities as
students, they engaged in more social interactions with their peers inside and outside of the
classroom. Both students credit their ability to acclimate themselves to academic life and
their interactions with others as contributors to their success in the Spanish program. This
finding supports the claim that students’ abilities to integrate themselves socially and
academically positively affect their academic performance (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Buckle,
2010; Tinto, 1993).

Findings further alluded to learners’ awareness of their ethnic identities and their
perceived acceptance into cultures other than their own as factors impacting their identities.
Research suggests that the degree by which students acculturate themselves with the target
culture greatly influences their creation of a language learner identity (Brown, 2007).
Redfield, Linton, and Herkovits (1936) defines acculturation as:

the phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures
come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original
culture patterns of either or both groups. (p. 149)

During the acculturation process, the language student may encounter culture shock,
particularly if their prior knowledge does not provide them the foundation to address issues
in the context of the new culture. This prior knowledge relates to the concept of meaning
perspectives from Illeris’s content dimension as described by transformative learning
We develop most of our meaning perspectives up through childhood and youth, and they then function both consciously and, to a high degree, unconsciously as governing our attitudes and modes of understanding. (p. 63)

Renée demonstrated one such meaning perspective when she shared her dismay as to why persons questioned her daily use of the Spanish language,

I thought, ‘Doesn’t everyone do this?’ To me it wasn’t, ‘Okay, this isn’t normal?’ To me it was normal. Go to school, take science, social studies, literature, math, some other class…Spanish. Then you have your one English class and I carried on my way.

I thought it was normal.

As a result of her language immersion experience beginning at age five and extending through elementary school, Renée perceived the use of the Spanish language as natural and, at times, obligatory. It was when this meaning perspective was challenged upon entering middle school, both formally with English-language standardized testing and informally through interactions with peers, that she was forced to reconsider the role of the Spanish language in her daily life. Renée’s language-learning transformation reflects Illeris’s explanation of how transformative learning “occurs when one discovers in one or another connection that the meaning perspectives do not fit with what one experiences or does” (p. 63).

Navigating emotions. Study participants also pointed to dealing with emotional responses to their environments and interactions with others as they developed their identities as language learners. For example, feelings of being an imposter compounded Eric’s
adjustment to life as a nontraditional college student. The imposter phenomenon refers to an individual’s feelings of deceit in convincing others to believe that they are smarter than they actually are (Harvey & Katz, 1985). Usually, individuals exhibiting the imposter phenomenon as a result of not conforming to their environments have already proven their ability to achieve. Several studies exist in the literature regarding the imposter phenomenon relative to students from racial and ethnic minorities—particularly Black males (Clance & Imes, 1978; Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996; Harvey & Katz, 1985). Nevertheless, Eric’s status as a nontraditional student after working for several years caused him to experience the phenomenon as he doubted his abilities to perform as expected. As research suggests, by successfully adapting to the academic and social aspects of his new environment, Eric was able to find a balance and achieve success in his studies (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering 1989).

Another important aspect in the development of language learner identities is the way in which societal influences impact learners’ self-perceptions. Eric demonstrated an element of the incentive dimension by exhibiting varying degrees of emotional intelligence. Illeris references the work of Daniel Goleman to describe emotional intelligence as,

…competencies such as self-awareness, self-control, and empathy, and the arts of listening, resolving conflicts, and cooperation…being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope. (p. 84)
In particular, Eric demonstrated several characteristics pertaining to Goleman’s definition of emotional intelligence as he explained how he consistently negotiates his pragmatic, duty-driven point of view and the expectations of his role as a Spanish tutor,

I’m taking a different approach. I’m not trying to be Mr. Amish that’s just like, ‘Try harder! Hard work is close to godliness!’ Get away from that and just be like, ‘Okay, well what’s up?’ I hear so much from people’s personal lives that would make me feel uncomfortable years ago where people don’t talk about their personal lives…So, I think that’s for me a hard thing, but I’m getting used to it quickly…I’m trying to be more sympathetic with people and see life from all aspects.

Eric’s self-reflection illustrates elements of emotional intelligence in multiple forms and exemplifies how his self-awareness challenges him to relate to his emotions in a way that encourages a positive learning experience for him and for others.

All learning—to include foreign language learning—occurs within a societal context (Basista & Hill, 2010; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Illeris, 2007). Relative to Illeris’s interaction dimension, Peter Jarvis (1992) explains that this socially embedded characteristic of learning refers to the process by which “learning is located in the interface of people’s biography and the sociocultural environment in which they live, for it is in this intersection that experiences occur” (as cited in Illeris, 2007, p. 103). This suggests that learning experiences can result from the interaction between a learner’s identity and the society in which he or she is a member. Within the realm of language learning, the attitudes and norms communicated by society have the potential to impact the perceptions of language learners
regarding the target language, learning, and themselves (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Participants in the current study reflected the relevance of this presumption through the ways in which they responded to the emotions evoked by societal reactions to their Spanish-speaking abilities. These manifestations included native speakers’ amazement during chance encounters in the community, displays of indifference, and representations of hostility.

Renée recounted a situation in which members of society challenged her learner identity during a socially embedded learning experience. This occurrence involved negative reactions she received from native Spanish-speakers in relation to her decision to communicate in Spanish during a trip to a Latino grocery store with her mother. She explained,

We went in there and it got quiet. We were just walking around. It’s like, ‘Who are you?’ Not the typical customer...I was so nervous…There was so much tension. We walked in and I was like, ‘Okay, that went from comfortable to uncomfortable real quick.

Renée encountered what Illeris describes as a “tension field between the individual and the social” (Illeris, 2007, p. 103) as it pertains to the incentive dimension of learning. Despite Renée’s ability to speak Spanish and the comfort she experienced using the Spanish language in the sheltered environment of the classroom, she discovered that within society, her choice to communicate in Spanish would not always be favorably received. It is in this tension field that Renée experiences a form of socialization in the Spanish-speaking community. Socialization refers to an individual’s acquisition of social norms while
negotiating his or her identity in relation to how things work in a society and how other individuals behave (Illeris, 2007). In Renée’s case, this instance of language socialization challenged her to understand and negotiate the situational context within the context of the target culture (Ochs, 2002; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001; Poole, 1992; Rymes, 1997). It was through this experience that Renée learned that in order to successfully participate as a member of the Spanish-speaking community she must remain confident in her identity as a Spanish-speaker and challenge the conflicting societal views that suggest she does not belong.

**Internal motivation.** In relation to the incentive dimension, Illeris (2007) explains that conflicts are a frequent motivational force in the learning process.

Precisely in connection with the significance of the incentive dimension for learning, one often becomes aware that learning, which is different from, and more than, acquiring subject matter, rarely proceeds as a smooth, progressive process, and the possibilities for learning that simultaneously contribute to personal development often take their starting point in one form or other of disturbance of the current personal or social balance. (p. 91)

In this manner, as long as a conflict is within the language learner’s ability to resolve it, the challenge will become a motivation for the learner and will subsequently increase their linguistic self-confidence (Clément, 1980; Clément, Gardner & Smythe, 1977; Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005). With regard to the present study, Eric, Laila, Malcolm, and Renée indicated the task of writing a Spanish paper in excess of ten pages as a conflict. They shared that this
assignment served as a disturbance in their journey to Spanish proficiency after experiencing periods of confidence in their classroom performances. Malcolm summed up this sentiment when he expressed,

When I first heard *10 page paper* I was like, ‘Um…10 pages? In Spanish? What?’…We’re writing about short stories. And I love Julio Cortázar. I love the story *Axolotl*…I like writing about it. But on the other hand, I don’t like analyzing literature. I like the story, but I don’t like to analyze. So when I found out the 10 page paper was going to be an analysis…now it’s rock bottom…the worst it could be.

In this example, Malcolm’s enjoyment for reading short stories was interrupted by the challenge of writing a lengthy analytical paper. Nevertheless, he and his peers experienced what Illeris describes as a *learning leap* by completing the task through the incorporation of a gradual step-wise approach to writing. Furthermore, these four students indicated that by completing this challenging task, they increased their confidence in their abilities and were internally motivated to accomplish more difficult tasks in- and outside of the classroom.

Integrative and instrumental orientations can also impact learner motivations to become proficient in another language (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Integratively oriented learners study languages resulting from their desire to communicate with native speakers, while those who are instrumentally oriented often approach language study as a result of more pragmatic reasons such as advancing professionally. Participants also alluded to internal motivations in the form of envisioning their future selves as bilingual healthcare workers, legal professionals, and translators. They also indicated their desires to
communicate with other Spanish speakers when volunteering in the community, during chance encounters, and among language learning peers. Consequently, the participants supported recent research that suggests that language learners can simultaneously orient themselves integratively and instrumentally and still achieve proficiency (Brown, 2007).

**External motivation.** The participants indicated several external motivations that influenced their decisions to study and persist in the Spanish program. Two of the primary external factors identified by participants included familial influence and societal stereotypes regarding language ability. For several participants, the financial and emotional investments their parents make in their language education encourages them to work harder in the pursuit of language proficiency. Language learners’ awareness of support from their parents motivates students to persist and excel in their study of the language (Gardner, 1985).

Resulting from the situated nature of language learning, society plays an important role in the development of language learner self-perceptions (Ochs, 2002; Poole, 1992; Rymes, 1997). Research also suggests that negative stereotypes imposed upon learners by the societal contexts in which they interact can illicit responses of fear and stereotype threat that may deter learners from the pursuit of language proficiency (Glynn, 2012; Hubbard & Mehan, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Claude Steele (1999) defines stereotype threat as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype” (p. 46). Participants in the current study reported instances in which family members, high school instructors, community members, and study abroad colleagues expressed prejudices regarding their
Spanish language education at an HBCU. Nevertheless, they utilized these societally imposed stereotypes as motivating forces to provide counter narratives and excel in the language learning process.

Within the interaction dimension of learning, a learning situation “not only influences, but also is a part of, the learning” (Illeris, 2007, p. 97). In this context, the physical learning environment and the social norms imposed by the society in which the learning is taking place both impact the learner and what is learned. During her interview, Renée provided an example of how her learning was situated in her understanding of the stereotypes and perceptions imposed upon her by the society in which she is a member. Renée first articulated that in middle school and high school, she often felt ostracized for her ability and decision to communicate in the Spanish language,

   I just was never comfortable. I felt like I was on guard all the time…because I was a minority at the school. People would always [ask], ‘Why are you in AP? You’re in the smart class.’ References like that. It’s crazy but there’s always the thing of you being looked down upon. You’re different.

Renée admitted that this period in her education taught her how persons’ misconceptions of others have the potential to negatively impact an individual’s self-esteem. She shared that in this context, many minority students dropped out of the program resulting from pressure to meet challenging academic demands and for fear of living up to societal stereotypes. However, she also asserted that she learned a positive and contradictory lesson as a student at an HBCU,
It’s just the environment you’re in… When you find people who have the same viewpoints or are supportive or doing what you’re trying to do… it’s helpful to get a better sense of yourself and kind of reinforce the idea that you are capable of more than what people make you to be.

According to Renée, the institutional culture of the HBCU in which her learning is situated taught her that she is a valued member of society and is not alone in her pursuit of proficiency in the Spanish language. She confided that this realization has helped her to overcome her fear of using the language, which she believes is a common source of intimidation for many minority language students.

Navigating the Path to Proficiency

Successful students in language learning programs take primary responsibility for seeking out ways in which they can improve their understanding of the language (Cotterall, 1999; Rubin & Thompson, 1982). Although the study participants varied in their preferred strategies for studying Spanish, they all agreed that students should be proactive participants in the learning process in order to attain proficiency. Findings suggest that beneficial strategies for achieving Spanish proficiency include the practical use of the language on a consistent basis, actively seeking help to improve areas of misunderstanding, and collaborating with peers formally and informally.

Practical application. Learners that interact with the target language in the form of mass media, printed material, authentic educational activities, and workplace tasks have an increased chance of developing proficiency in the language (Serdyukov, 2010). Despite
differing in their preferred methods of practice, study participants identified multiple ways in which they consistently engage in the Spanish language. Eric, Malcolm, and Renée each listed the use of reading as a method to improve their writing abilities. However, while Malcolm selects Spanish magazine articles that he can also read in English for verification of meaning, Eric and Renée favor authentic texts written only in Spanish. Nevertheless, each student acknowledged that their choice to read in Spanish helps improve their understanding and comfort with the structure of the language. This practice illustrates how language learners improve their written use of grammatical structures and expand vocabulary through reading (Coady, 1997; Krashen, 1989). Similarly, the participants had differing opinions regarding ways in which to improve oral proficiency in Spanish. Eric encouraged potential students to take advantage of opportunities to communicate with other Spanish speakers. He believes that these conversations are more practical than the generic scenarios presented in most textbooks.

Several students also mentioned the use of technological resources as helpful instruments in the study of Spanish. Research in the field of technological resources use in second language acquisition is steadily growing and findings suggest that learners benefit greatly from their ability to receive immediate feedback, receive language input, and produce language virtually (Lai, 2011; Ruiz & Garrido, 2013; Serdyukov, 2010; Zhang & Zhao, 2011). Whereas Renée indicated her primary use of technological resources for this purpose as being limited to reading online blogs and sending text messages, Laila chooses to utilize a variety of electronic resources. These resources include sending text messages, social media
sites like Facebook and YouTube, as well as the news and television sources, *Yahoo! En Español* and the *Univisión* mobile application. Malcolm also cited his use of electronic literary applications on his Kindle device and online practice websites.

Additionally, research has shown that language learners who interact more frequently in environments where the target language is used are more likely to achieve language proficiency (Serdyukov, 2010). Furthermore, successful language learners often attribute their ability to achieve proficiency to consistent communication with native speakers and interactions within the associated cultures (Manzanares, 2006). All of the participants mentioned that they commit themselves to speaking in Spanish with acquaintances that know the language.

Eric and Janelle also shared that their time studying abroad in Uruguay and Spain, respectively, simultaneously impacted how they learned and served as learning experiences in and of themselves. Janelle confided, “I learned so much, and I’ve met so many people from different places, and Spanish is different in every country, so my vocabulary has grown so much.” In addition to explaining the positive impact made by the direct assistance of faculty members and peers while studying in Spain, Janelle’s statement infers a lesson learned from her physical placement of being located in Spain. Through her interactions with others, she discovered first-hand that Spanish is as linguistically diverse as her native English.

**Self-advocacy.** Early language learning research suggests that successful language learners eagerly embrace mistakes as opportunities for growth (Rubin, 1975). Subsequent
studies indicate, however, that language learner preferences for feedback and correction are influenced by the learner’s personal preferences and characteristics (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Thompson & Rubin, 1993). Participants’ preferences regarding feedback reflected similar trends in found in the literature. Whereas, Eric and Renée were the only participants who alluded to embracing their mistakes and focusing on problem areas, Janelle, Malcolm, and Laila also acknowledged the need to seek assistance in order to improve understanding. Janelle recognized her need for repetition in the learning process and credited her expression of this need as positively impacting her learning experience in the program. Renée also believes that actively seeking assistance from her instructors benefits her journey to proficiency as well. Since students and instructors often disagree with the quantity and type of assistance that is needed, learners must advocate for themselves by clearly expressing their needs and ensuring that they are met (Brown, 2009; Davis, 1992; Park, 2010).

**Collaboration.** Peer support is an integral component of language learning and has been shown to broaden student perspectives, enhance content reflection, and provide learner support (Lee, 2007; Spolsky, 2000). By engaging in collaboration through the use of structured “buddy” systems, informal working groups, and peer-to-peer instructions, participants effectively lowered the element of anxiety often associated with language study (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997). With regard to the interaction dimension, collaborative learning occurs when a group of persons work together in order to learn something new (Illeris, 2007). All of the participants in the current study expressed the
importance of collaborative learning in their acquisition of Spanish. Furthermore, each of the participants attributed the existence and frequency of these collaborative encounters to intimate environment resulting from their enrollment at an HBCU. The students shared examples of how they consistently work together to improve each other’s understanding of grammar and vocabulary and the ways in which they hold each other accountable in the preparation of presentations and written assignments. When asked why they actively choose to work with one another in this manner, each of the participants agreed with this sentiment provided by Laila,

Because they’re in my department and…it’s like a family, a unit type of thing…And this is an HBCU and people…really need to start helping each other more, regardless of if the person’s black or white. As a student, we’re in the class, we’re classmates, we’re colleagues. You shouldn’t be apathetic to other people.

The study participants’ positive perceptions of collaborative learning support current research regarding social interactions in learning (Gascoigne, 2012; McCombs, 1991) and are exemplary of an important component of Illeris’s interaction dimension of learning.

Furthermore, during the process of collaboration through peer-to-peer instruction, Eric, Janelle, and Malcolm expressed what Illeris defines as meta-learning. In meta-learning there is a “significant conflict of interests and there is the potential for a transcendent adaptation” (Illeris, 2007, p. 68). Each of these participants utilized meta-learning when they faced the task of determining how to assist their peers with learning new material. In order to accomplish this task, the students had to first think of how they learn and what makes sense
to them, in addition to how they and their peers prefer to be taught. This process of meta-learning challenged the participants to critically analyze their own strategies for learning and then determine how to transform this understanding into a generalized method of instructing others.

**Supportive Faculty in Learner Success Stories**

The study participants were adamant about the positive effects their instructors had on their learning experiences. Common perceptions among the participants are that the faculty members in the WSSU Spanish program are helpful, understanding, and invested in the success of their students. In the context of language learning, the presence of a diverse faculty is essential in providing these high quality interactions among students and their instructors (Cox, 2010; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). These interactions have been shown to occur more often at HBCUs (Nasim et al., 2005). As research suggests, participants in the current study positively associated their success in language learning with their interactions with faculty.

**Academic support.** Research suggests that effective language instructors employ teaching strategies that address multiple learning styles (Davis, 1992; Tse, 2000). Women instructors and faculty members of color are more inclined to utilize student-centered approaches in the language-learning classroom (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Eric expressed that these attitudes were projected at the beginning of a recent semester in which the instructor reviewed concepts taught in lower levels in both English and Spanish in order to ensure student understanding before the introduction of new material. Language learning
research indicates that students’ foundational linguistic knowledge of their native language provides a basis for making meaning of the second language (Chomsky, 1968; Haegeman, 1994). Consequently, by providing brief review lessons of previously learned grammar, WSSU Spanish faculty members provide their students with a firm foundation for acquiring new linguistic material.

Effective language instructors also provide prompt and meaningful feedback, provide opportunities for the practical application of knowledge, and encourage student creativity (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Heffernan & Berghoff, 2000; Houser, 1999; Serdyukove, 2010; Vasquez, 2004). Participants expressed that their understanding and comfort in using the Spanish language improved as a result of the helpful feedback they received on written and oral assignments. They further indicated that their instructors’ innovative and interactive lessons simultaneously engaged and challenged them during the learning process.

The inclusion of multiculturally diverse topics is an important part of language instruction (Davis, 1992). This is of particular importance at HBCUs where research indicates students are less likely to study languages at the advanced levels due to the absence of ethnocentric perspectives (Clark, 1980; Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; Peters, 1994). Furthermore, language programs must critically analyze the narratives they portray in the form of standardized curriculum that favor one linguistic style over another (Beyer, 2010; Warren & Hytten, 2004). In the following excerpts, participants demonstrate how students in the same courses can interpret content differently as a result of their unique learner identities.
Through the use of the reflection as *mirroring*, Eric, Janelle, Laila, and Renée provided examples of their reactions to the instruction of culture in their Spanish courses. According to Illeris, mirroring involves the learner finding significance for oneself in the content by using one’s own “personal identity as the yardstick” (p. 65). Eric noted that despite the budding inclusion of diverse topics he has encountered in his courses, the curriculum remains overwhelmingly Eurocentric. He explained the social embeddedness of language curricula as follows,

You kind of get these movements that you want to talk about or hear about or read more about, and you kind of get rejected, and it’s like, ‘No, this is what they do in Spain, so this is what we’re going to do.’ I’m not going to Spain. I don’t really care about Spain to be frank. It’s like, we have all these people here in the Americas that you kind of forget or ignore.

In this instance, Eric exemplified how his identity as a resident of various Spanish-speaking communities conflicted with the socially accepted approach to the instruction of Spanish language and culture. Based in this identity and the resulting cultural competence, Eric challenged the presumption that peninsular Spanish norms and ways of speaking were the only ones worthy of attention in the classroom. His opposition reflects Jarvis’s explanation that as a learner matures,

…they usually develop a mind of their own and then process the external cultural stimuli and respond to them in a variety of ways…Individuals begin to act back on the social world that has formed them. (p. 103)
Conversely, through the in-class examination of Afro-Latino populations, Renée recognized that her use of the Spanish language as a woman of African ancestry was not unique and that several generations of African-descended communities comprised a large part of the Spanish-speaking world. Renée shared that this discovery aided her in identifying her role as a global citizen. Janelle also explained that by mirroring the importance of Afro-Latino history on her ethnic identity, she uncovered a method by which she could reconnect with an unfamiliar past. Laila further shared the positive impact of studying Afro-Latinos in the following instance of mirroring,

It makes me feel great that I can actually read about people that look like me. I mean people say I look Latina to them but I’m Black so I can relate to both when I speak Spanish, and I have ancestors that were slaves. And I just don’t feel like an outsider because I’m not Hispanic…because they have African roots, too. We share something. We share common ground.

**Emotional support.** Participants also specified the importance of faculty members’ belief in their potential. Research shows that instructors who are successful with teaching culturally diverse learners often have an affinity for communicating high student expectations, evoking feelings of belonging, and creating safe spaces for student growth (Aaronsohn, Carter & Howell, 1995; Banks, 2001; Barrett, 1993; Gibson, 2004). Effective language instructors also guide students in challenging negative beliefs and perceptions they have about themselves and language learning (Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011). Intriguingly, each participant acknowledged that they considered ending their study of the Spanish
language after facing a variety of challenges. Nevertheless, they all credited the support they received from the WSSU Spanish faculty members as the determining factor in their decisions to persist in the Spanish program. This finding supports research that suggests that meaningful interactions between faculty and students positively impact students’ rates of retention and success (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

Illeris describes the achievement of mental and bodily balance as an important part of the incentive dimension of learning. In the present study, the data emphasized participants’ needs to specifically achieve mental balance. This mental balance often resulted from mentorship-style relationships with their Spanish instructors. Eric, Malcolm, and Renée shared that they sought the guidance of their instructors when faced with challenges related to coursework or for guidance in preparation for their future professions. Nevertheless, although Laila and Janelle also indicated seeking assistance in these areas, they stressed the positive impact made by their instructors through the provision of personal and emotional advice. Laila expressed,

One of my instructors is my advisor and we’re very close. We have personal conversations sometimes. Nothing inappropriate. I feel like you have [student added emphasis] to have a relationship with every person you meet…It’s like this is a business but this is my personal growth…Sometimes I’m very hard on myself and my professor makes me calm down.

The participants in this study each articulated their ability to achieve mental balance, specific to his or her needs, by seeking support from faculty members in the department. As indicated
in Chapter Five, it was the attainment of this mental balance through the assistance of their instructors that motivated all of the study participants to persist in their study of the Spanish language.

**Language Learning Across the Dimensions**

Central to Illeris’s three-dimensional learning model is that learners simultaneously utilize, in varying degrees, each dimension of the framework during the acquisition process (Illeris, 2007). Furthermore, it is critical in the understanding of learning to recognize that it takes place within a societal context. With regard to the present study, participants most often exhibited Illeris’s principle of competence as it relates to learning as a whole.

Illeris suggests that when a learner employs the three dimensions in the learning process, he or she is able to develop what he describes as competence (p. 137). He indicates that competence can develop in an environment in which the learner interprets applicable activities using mental models shaped by his or her identity and experiences. This interpretation should occur within an appropriate social context for practical application. More specifically, competence is concerned with,

…how a person, an organisation or a nation is able to handle a relevant, but often unforeseen and unpredictable problematic situation, because we know with certainty that late-modern development constantly generates new and unknown problems…(p. 135)

Each of the study participants shared instances within and outside of the classroom that indicated her or his competence regarding the use of the Spanish language and
participation in the associated cultures. These situations included reflections regarding the participants’ identities and how they perceive and are perceived by their environments and the societies in which they are members. They also ranged from formal learning opportunities, presented in the form of classroom curriculum, to informal encounters in the community or on the job. Regardless of the circumstance, all of the participants revealed that by relying on their knowledge of the Spanish language through the content dimension, acknowledging their unique perspectives as described by the incentive dimension, and understanding their environment as it pertains to the interaction dimension, they were able to meet the demands required of a Spanish-speaker within their societal context.

**Implications for Higher Education**

By investigating students’ language-learning beliefs, the findings of this research study provide important implications for policy and practice in Spanish-language programs at HBCUs. The results from this study can aid faculty and other higher education administrators in their efforts to increase the number of students who earn degrees in the field of Spanish. Practitioners and policymakers can also utilize these findings to simultaneously enhance students’ experiences in these programs.

**Restructuring Curricula**

Research suggests that students are more inclined to persist in language programs in which the course content is culturally relevant to the students (Cox, 2010; Davis & Markham, 1991; Guillaume, 1994). Data from this study support existing literature regarding the importance of including Afrocentric themes in the Spanish curriculum. Many participants
shared that, prior to the introduction of these topics by their HBCU instructors, they were unaware of the existence and importance of Afro-Hispanic populations in Latin America and Spain. Several participants indicated that by offering courses such as Black Women Writers in Latin America, Afro-Hispanic Masterpieces of Literature, and Afro-Mexico, they became more engaged in the classroom and developed a renewed interest in studying the Spanish language. Grounded by these findings, Spanish language developers and instructors at HBCUs should consider restructuring their Spanish curricula to include more Afrocentric themes.

Based on study findings that indicated the vocabulary and grammatical structures taught favored those predominantly used in Spain, faculty and curriculum designers should also reconsider the use of these elements as the yardstick by which Spanish proficiency in higher education classrooms is often measured. During his interview, Eric expressed that the exclusion of Latin American norms, customs, and lexical trends disservices non-native and native speakers, alike. Eric’s concern regarding the omission of the various Latin American perspectives in Spanish language classrooms supports existing research on the topic. By favoring one linguistic style over another, instructors risk alienating students who have adopted—through childhood or formal education—styles specific to other regions. This bias may deter students from persisting in their study of Spanish (Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Villa & Villa, 1998). To prohibit this occurrence, faculty members could invite knowledgeable students and instructors to share their experiences and familiarity with various Spanish-speaking communities. Curriculum developers could also adopt textbooks
that provide a multicultural depiction of Spanish-speaking populations throughout the world
and supplement textbook material with multimedia and print resources that further illustrate
the diversity within these cultures.

Creating a Mentorship System

Secondly, the study findings also highlighted the importance of peer and faculty
mentors in the language learning process of successful Spanish-language students. The
participants expressed that the support their instructors provided with regard to academic and
professional issues, as well as personal and emotional conflicts, ultimately influenced their
decisions to remain in the Spanish program. Current research reinforces the positive impact
faculty members have on students attending HBCUs and minority students learning world
languages at a variety of institutions (Cox, 2010; Hernandez, 2000; Lundberg & Schreiner,
2004). Data also indicated that students’ reliance on one another contributed positively to
their success in the acquisition of Spanish.

Based on the findings that suggest a positive impact on language acquisition resulting
from collaborations with peers and faculty members, I recommend that Spanish programs at
HBCUs develop mentoring systems in which newer students are paired with seasoned
students and faculty members. In the context of these mentorship-style relationships,
advanced students and faculty can provide individualized advice on how to navigate the
various aspects of the program and other facets of undergraduate life. Additionally, mentors
can offer emotional support to newer students—particularly with regard to negotiating
identities as Spanish-speakers with the societies in which they engage. Mentors can also serve as accountability partners as these students progress through the Spanish program.

Ideally, student-to-student pairings would occur by partnering a first-year student with a third-year student. In this relationship, the upper-level student will work with her or his mentee for approximately two years until graduation. Once the mentor graduates, the mentee—now a third-year student—will be assigned a first-year mentee of his or her own and will assume the role of mentor. At the beginning of the school year, faculty members could conduct a daylong workshop for third- and fourth-year Spanish language students regarding good practices for mentoring and serve as mentoring coaches for these students throughout the academic year.

**Student Success Workshops**

Finally, data from this study emphasized the importance of incorporating a variety of strategies in the pursuit of language-learning success. These strategies ranged from ways to improve writing in Spanish to advocating for oneself in the classroom and as members in the Spanish-speaking community. Despite the circumstance, study participants encouraged the use of several strategies and resources to achieve competence with regard to the Spanish language and associated cultures. Grounded in research regarding the correlation between student support and student success in language learning (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987), HBCU Spanish programs would benefit from partnering with a variety of campus offices, departments, and community members in the development of a success-oriented workshop series for students. I recommend that HBCU Spanish programs
organize these workshop series using the student-identified beneficial resources and learning strategies highlighted by the participants in this study. Table 7 offers an outline of the proposed first-year Spanish language student workshop series, *Éxito en Español* [Success in Spanish].

Table 7. Outline of the Éxito en Español Workshop Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Etapa</th>
<th>Workshop Title</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Gettign a Successful Start in Spanish</em></td>
<td>September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning your course of study</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Available resources</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategies for success</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Spanish in Our Neighborhood</em></td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presentations from Latino community organizations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting Involved: Volunteer opportunities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upcoming events in the Latino community</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Writing Research Papers</em></td>
<td>November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MLA and APA formatting basics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion of the writing process</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tips and tricks for academic writing in Spanish</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>¿A estudiar el extranjero?! Study Abroad 101</em></td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student accounts from abroad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study abroad opportunities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financing options</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Creating a checklist</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>¡A trabajar! Preparing for Your Profession</em></td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Résumé writing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Searching for employment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview essentials</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building your skillset</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>¿A estudiar! Preparing for Graduate Studies</em></td>
<td>March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing a sample essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studying for the GRE, MCAT, GMAT, and LSAT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Searching for schools/programs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Visiting campuses</td>
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</table>
By providing students with helpful strategies for studying the Spanish language during the first few weeks of their academic program, instructors can assist incoming students with adjusting to the rigors of collegiate coursework. During the first month, new students will learn how to organize their four-year course plans and will receive information about campus and community resources available to them. Faculty members should also invite upper-level students to this workshop to share learning strategies they found beneficial during their matriculation in the program.

The second workshop is designed to introduce students to the diversity of the Latino community in their immediate environment. Data from the current study demonstrated that several participants noticed an improvement in their comfort in using the Spanish language as a result of engaging with members of the local community in the target language. Furthermore, study participants expressed a greater appreciation for and understanding of Spanish-speaking populations due to their first-hand encounters with the communities surrounding their HBCU. In an effort to continue this positive trend, faculty members should encourage Latino community organizations to send representatives to present on the importance and function of their businesses. They should also utilize this opportunity to recruit students as volunteers and publicize events in which the students could participate throughout the year.

A writing workshop geared toward the development of research papers in Spanish will serve as the final workshop for the fall semester. At this meeting, students will review basic requirements for proper citation according to the current editions of the Modern
Language Association and the American Psychological Association guidelines. Faculty members should invite a representative from the university library who specializes in aiding students with writing research papers to present this topic. Spanish faculty members will also share their advice regarding considerations to be made when writing various academic works in Spanish. To enhance the seminar, Spanish faculty should also invite members of the English faculty—specifically those who teach writing-intensive courses—to share their expertise regarding the writing process. Finally, upper-level students will share their tips and suggestions as it pertains to overcoming issues and improving writing. The findings in this study indicated that all of the participants considered writing in Spanish to be one of the most challenging aspects of their program. Nevertheless, by receiving helpful advice and feedback from their instructors, they were able to overcome this challenge and reported being less intimidated during subsequent writing assignments. By providing students with these helpful strategies at the beginning of their program, faculty may help students circumvent the anxiety associated with writing in the target language.

The spring semester should begin with a workshop on how to plan a study abroad experience. Study findings suggested that four of the participants were initially unaware of the steps necessary to organize a trip to another country. However, after two of the participants successfully partook in trips abroad, they expressed the desire to make plans for a subsequent trip within the year. During this workshop, students who have previously traveled abroad will present their experiences and answer questions regarding their time in another country. Faculty members should also invite representatives from the university’s
Office of International Studies and Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid to discuss the various study abroad programs and financial support available to students. Additionally, I encourage faculty members to assist students in the development of a checklist similar to the one reported by Janelle and commit to holding students accountable for accomplishing the tasks necessary to prepare for a trip abroad. This workshop could encourage more students to study abroad as a result of the step-wise process presented to them, which removes the ambiguity often associated with study abroad opportunities.

A workshop focused on career planning would occur during the middle of the semester and would highlight strategies for writing résumés in English and Spanish, as well as how to search for positions intended for persons who are capable of communicating in the Spanish language. This workshop would also discuss interview etiquette with a specific focus on cultural considerations, tone of voice, and choice of words when interviewing in Spanish. It should also emphasize the ways in which students can associate the requirements of their ideal jobs with their current task of developing a variety of skillsets. Data in the present study indicated that the participants often sought their instructors’ assistance as they prepared for future careers utilizing the Spanish language. Participants also indicated varying degrees of hesitation in acknowledging their proficiency in Spanish while seeking employment. Based on these findings, a workshop centered on the applying for Spanish-related professions could ease some of the apprehensions that were observed in the study participants.

The final workshop of the Éxito en Español series would focus on researching and applying for graduate programs. Interestingly, although several of the study participants
indicated their desire to have professions in fields that traditionally require advanced degrees, there was no mention of an intention to apply to a graduate or professional school. This omission could have resulted for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, the final workshop is structured in a way to prepare students for applying to advanced educational programs, if that is their goal. This workshop will include topics such as: writing sample essays in Spanish; studying for graduate school entrance examinations; and searching for applicable schools and programs. Additionally, faculty members should invite representatives from graduate programs in the field to talk to students and answer any questions they may have about enrolling and persisting in graduate programs. Faculty should also invite graduates of the Spanish program who enrolled in graduate or professional schools to share their experiences and serve as exemplars of what the current students can achieve.

**Implications for Theory**

In an effort to uncover the language-learning beliefs of successful Spanish-language learners at an HBCU, this study was framed using Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model. This study also incorporated Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework in order to elicit information regarding students’ success in the study of Spanish at their institution. The findings of this study support Illeris’s postulation that learning occurs in a three-dimensional manner within an overarching societal context. Data also provides convincing evidence for further uses of Illeris’s model and Harper’s anti-deficit achievement framework within the context of Spanish language learning research—particularly at HBCUs.
Illeris’s Three Dimensions of Learning

Illeris posits that for learning to occur, the three dimensions of content, incentive, and interaction must be engaged. Furthermore, this occurrence always exists within a societal context. This framework breaks with traditional learning research, which often focuses solely on the content dimension (Preece, 2005; Ritchie, 2007), or on the incentive and interaction dimensions, individually (Damasio, 1994, 1999). Furthermore, existing literature in language learning research and students at HBCUs similarly investigates the content (Dörnyei, 2003, 2005, 2009), incentive (Gardner, 1985, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and interaction dimensions (Ochs, 2002; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001; Poole, 1992; Rymes, 1997; White, 1999) independent of one another.

Whereas Illeris’s model is often employed in research regarding workplace learning, the findings of this study indicated how the three-dimensional model can be applied to a variety of learning contexts—including language-learning research at HBCUs. Data from the study showed that participants utilized elements of the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions each time they engaged in a learning experience (see Figure 4). Participants also acknowledged how the learning experiences were embedded in a societal context.
By overlaying key study findings onto Illeris’s revised model, this study illustrates how the combination of the Spanish language learners’ identities and the various learning environments they encounter affects their success in language acquisition. Specifically, a reexamination of the revised model with the study findings takes Illeris’s explanation of the societal impact on learning one step further. In the context of language study, the participants demonstrated how their social situations (i.e. learning spaces) and societal situations (i.e. reactions from others to their Spanish speaking abilities) directly influenced their interactions with, and subsequently acquisition of, the Spanish language. This environmental influence provided the context for the participants’ identity development and motivations as language learners and their formal and informal exposure to and use of the Spanish language. The study participants demonstrated that the result of the interaction between their environment and their language learner selves—as illustrated, for example, by their socially embedded
learning experiences and collaborations with peers and faculty—was the successful acquisition of the Spanish language. This supports the idea that rather than merely existing as elements of the learning process—as Illeris suggests—the participants’ interactions with and within their environments serve as integral components in explaining how and why they achieve Spanish language proficiency. This study demonstrates that Illeris’s model may provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding how the traditional themes of identity, motivation, language socialization, and environment in language-learning research converge with a variety of other factors during the learning process and result in the learner’s language proficiency.

**Harper’s Anti-deficit Achievement Framework**

This study applied Harper’s anti-deficit achievement framework as a methodological guide in the collection of data. Harper’s framework, utilizing more than three decades of data on Black males in higher education, highlights the reasons why students are successful (Harper, 2010, 2012). He developed this framework in response to the counter-intuitive trends in research that attempted to improve the success rates of minority males in higher education by investigating the obstacles that prohibit them from achieving their goals. Harper’s revised approach rests in the restructuring of research questions to elicit explanations of how students successfully persist in their programs.

Similarly, language-learning research regarding minority students and research pertaining to students at HBCUs focuses heavily on student deficiencies (Clowney & Legge, 1979; Guillaume, 1994; Hancock, 1994; Moore, 2005; National Center for Education
Statistics, 2002; Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998). Since the intent of this study was to understand student success in the study of Spanish at an HBCU, I employed Harper’s framework and tailored my research questions and interview protocol from an anti-deficit perspective. Consequently, the data resulted in an expression of responses that explained students’ experiences in their successful pursuit of Spanish proficiency. It is apparent from Harper’s work and the current study that the use of an anti-deficit achievement framework is most helpful in providing a foundation for a model of student success in a variety of contexts.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The present study focused solely on the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish-language learners who attend an HBCU in the southeastern region of the United States. The choice to limit the study to students at HBCUs was based on research that indicated that although minority students are less likely to study Spanish at the advanced levels (Guillaume, 1994; Moore, 2005, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), minority students who attend HBCUs are more likely to persist in their programs (Cox, 2010; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, & Young, 2005). The findings from this study provide a context for additional research in reference to language-learning and student success at HBCUs. I acknowledge that the limited size of the study sample may not be representative of all HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions. Therefore, future research should also examine HBCUs with larger enrollments in their respective Spanish language programs and should occur in different areas of the nation. This expansion would
provide a greater opportunity to uncover a variety of student perspectives within increasingly diverse societal contexts.

The scope of this dissertation was grounded by Illeris’s (2002) three dimensions of learning model that describes learning as occurring through the employment of the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions within a societal context (Illeris, 2007). Illeris found that existing literature regarding learning failed to acknowledge the interdependence of these dimensions and their embeddedness within society during the learning process. Similarly, the current body of knowledge regarding language learning does not acknowledge the collective presence of all three dimensions in language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2003, 2005, 2009; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Ochs, 2002; Weeden, 1996). The findings of this study support Illeris’s framework for learning and provide an avenue by which language-learning researchers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the language acquisition process. In addition to investigating the interdependence of the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions in language learning, it would be helpful to further explore students’ perceptions regarding the impact of society on their acquisition of Spanish. For example, future studies could expand to include the impact of familial, peer, and other societal influences and expectations on students’ decisions to engage with the Spanish language and associated cultures.

This collective case study also utilized Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework to highlight student success in the field of language study. In order to improve the success rates of students who study Spanish at HBCUs, it is important to
understand and capitalize on how current students achieve success in Spanish programs at these institutions. By using an anti-deficit approach, this study provided a general overview of student perceptions regarding Spanish language study. Future research could employ the anti-deficit achievement framework to individually focus on specific aspects of student success in the language acquisition process at HBCUs such as: the positive impact of faculty support, collaborative learning, language socialization, and learning strategies. In this manner, language-learning researchers can develop models of student success in Spanish at HBCUs pertaining to multiple areas of the language acquisition process.

Finally, the study findings alluded to the importance of faculty involvement in the success of Spanish-language students at HBCUs and simultaneously supported existing research in this area (Hernandez, 2000; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995). As such, it may benefit future researchers to investigate faculty and administrators’ perceptions regarding Spanish-language instruction at HBCUs, placing specific emphasis on mentorship roles and strategies for ensuring student success. Furthermore, based on existing research regarding student success and culturally relevant curricula (Clark, 1980; Clowney & Legge, 1979; Rogers, 2006), it would be beneficial to ascertain how Spanish instructors at HBCUs develop ways to help students uncover the profound diversity of the Spanish-speaking world.

**Conclusion**

With the decline of student interest in studying Spanish at the advanced level, efforts must be made to increase student persistence in Spanish programs. This is especially true
among minority students and Spanish programs at HBCUs. As such, the purpose of this exploratory collective case study was to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. Overall, the data supported Illeris’s tenets and demonstrated how each successful Spanish-language learner employed a combination of the three dimensions of learning to achieve proficiency in Spanish within the context of their HBCU, local and global communities, and the societal contexts to which they are associated.

Findings suggested that students at HBCUs associate their successful acquisition of the Spanish language to their self-perceptions as language-learners, the strategies they employ in the acquisition process, and the positive impact of Spanish language faculty members. Specifically, participants shared that overcoming challenges associated with their identities and socialization in the Spanish-speaking world helped them develop confidence in other areas of the language program. Participants also indicated that strategies such as reading Spanish works, conversing in the target language, utilizing technological resources, and seeking assistance helped them familiarize themselves with the mechanics of the language. Furthermore, participants acknowledged that the academic and personal support they received from Spanish language faculty members heavily influenced their decisions to remain in the Spanish program.

In an effort to enhance students’ experiences in HBCU Spanish programs, faculty members and higher education administrators should consider restructuring curricula to include themes that are culturally relevant to the students they educate and reflective of the
diversity of the Spanish-speaking world. Grounded in participants’ emphasis on the importance of peer and faculty support, Spanish programs should also work with current students to establish a mentoring system for first- and second-year students. Furthermore, this study’s findings demonstrated that the implementation of a success-oriented workshop series, formulated using participants’ reported strategies for success, may provide future Spanish language students with a bank of resources to help them in the successful acquisition of the language.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A—NCSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) Application

North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
REQUEST FOR EXEMPTION (Administrative Review)

GENERAL INFORMATION
1. Date Submitted: September 30, 2014
2. Title of Project: Tres dimensiones de aprendizaje: Language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU
3. Principal Investigator: Rachael Brooks
4. Principal Investigator Email: rmhnoo2@ncsu.edu
5. Department: Leadership, Policy & Adult and Higher Education
6. Campus Box Number: N/A
7. Phone Number: 401-903-2767
8. Faculty Sponsor Name if Student Submission: Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles
9. Faculty Sponsor Email Address if Student Submission: jgayles@ncsu.edu
10. Source of Funding (Sponsor, Federal, External, etc); N/A
   If Externally funded, include sponsor name and university account number:

RANK:

Faculty: ☐ Student: ☐ Undergraduate ☑ Masters ☐ PhD; Other:

As the principal investigator, my signature (or electronic submission) testifies that I have read and understood the University Policy and Procedures for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in the Proposal Narrative and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to the Committee in the form of an amendment for its approval prior to implementation.

*Electronic submissions to the IRB are considered signed via an electronic signature*

Principal Investigator:
Rachael Brooks 9/30/2014
(typed/printed name) (signature) (date)

As the faculty sponsor, my signature (or electronic submission) testifies that I have reviewed this application thoroughly and will oversee the research in its entirety. I hereby acknowledge my role as the principal investigator of record.

Faculty Sponsor:
Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles 9/30/2014
(typed/printed name) (signature) (date)

PLEASE COMPLETE AND E-MAIL TO: irb-coordinator@ncsu.edu

For IRBCS office use only

Regulatory Compliance Office Disposition

Exemption Granted ☐: Exempt Under: ☐ b.1 ☐ b.2 ☐ b.3 ☐ b.4 ☐ b.6
Not Exempt, Submit a full protocol ☐

IRB Office Representative Date
Project Description: Describe your project by providing a summary and answering the requests for information below.

1. Project Summary. Please make sure to include the purpose and rationale for your study and a brief overview of your methods.

   The purpose of this study is to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interaction dimensions of learning. To better understand this phenomenon, I will ask each student to participate separately in one face-to-face interview that will last approximately one hour on the campus of Winston-Salem State University. If necessary, I may contact the student by phone or email to ask follow-up questions. The interviews will be recorded using an audiotape for accuracy. Participants will also write a letter to a hypothetical incoming first year student in which they will give advice about how to succeed in learning Spanish at Winston-Salem State University.

2. Describe your participant population. This includes age range, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and any vulnerable populations that will be targeted for enrollment.

   This study will involve six to eight Spanish language students at Winston-Salem State University, age 18 or older. To qualify for participation students must meet two of the three following criteria: (1) he or she has been rated at the level of Superior via the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Assessment of Performance Toward Proficiency in Languages; (2) he or she studied in a university Spanish-language program at the advanced level of courses listed at 3000 or above; (3) he or she has been enrolled in various college-level language courses with the aim of earning a baccalaureate degree or in the discipline as indicated by the declaration of a Spanish major and/or spending an extensive period of time (5 or more weeks) in another Spanish-speaking country to attain fluency.

3. Describe how potential participants will be approached about the research and how informed consent will be obtained. Alternatively, provide an explanation of why informed consent will not be obtained. Include a copy of recruitment materials, such as, scripts, letters of introduction, emails, etc. with your submission.

   I will request the assistance of the Department Chairperson and instructors to identify current language students at the University who could be classified as successful Spanish language learners. These faculty members will supply email addresses for the potential student participants. Once I receive the names and email address for the potential student participants, I will send them an email explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures I plan to use, and their rights as participants. I will also provide my contact phone number and request a conversation with each of them to answer any possible questions they have about the study

   After I generate a list of students who consent to participate, I will email a short questionnaire (see attached) to each of them that will help determine eligibility and will request information regarding their educational background and motivations to learn Spanish. During the initial meeting with each interviewee, I will provide the student participants with a consent form (see attached) detailing the expectations for participation in this study. I will inform them that participation in the investigation is on a voluntary basis and that they may elect to remove themselves from the study at any time without fear of repercussions.

4. Describe how identifying information will be recorded and associated with data (e.g. code numbers used that are linked via a master list to subjects’ names). Alternatively, provide details on how study data will be collected and stored anonymously (“anonymously” means that there is no link whatsoever between participant identities and data). Describe management of data: security, storage, access, and final disposition.

   To maintain confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms for participants’ names and will save all electronic files on two password-protected external hard drives located in separate secure locations—my home office and my office located at North Carolina Central University. At each of
these locales, the external hard drives, when not in use, will be locked in file cabinets to which I only have access. I will also secure documents collected from participants in the file cabinet at my North Carolina Central University office when not in use. I will label the audio recordings with the participants' pseudonyms and will store them for one year after the conclusion of the study in case I need to reference the data for any follow-up purposes.

Upon completion of the study, I will return these documents to their owners via Certified Mail with Restricted Delivery through the United States Postal Service. By using this service, only the designated recipient of the package can obtain the item after having verified their identity. Furthermore, the United States Postal Service will issue a return receipt to me indicating that the materials were successfully delivered to the addressee. Additionally, after one year from the successful defense of my dissertation, I will permanently delete the audio recordings from my computer and the external hard drives.

5. Provide a detailed (step-by-step) description of all study procedures, including descriptions of what the participants will experience. Include topics, materials, procedures, for use of assessments (interviews, surveys, questionnaires, testing methods, observations, etc.).

I will conduct one-on-one interviews with the student participants on the campus of Winston-Salem State University, to ensure the maximum amount of participation with consideration being made to student convenience. Upon meeting each interviewee, I will ask the participant to read and sign a consent form detailing the expectations for participation in this study. I will ensure that each session lasts no more than sixty minutes by following the interview protocol as prescribed. However, I will allow the interviewee the opportunity to provide details about his or her experiences. I will also make observational field notes pertaining to facial and body expressions during the interview process. After conducting each interview, the audio tapes will be transcribed, and I will send a copy of the typed transcripts to the study participants to check for any omissions or necessary corrections. If necessary, I will also contact the participants via phone or email for further clarification.

I will ask participants to write a letter to incoming first year students in which they will give advice about how to succeed in learning Spanish at Winston-Salem State University. In the document prompt, I will request that the participants introduce themselves to the hypothetical incoming student by providing a detailed description of their language learning background and exposure to other languages and cultures leading up to their matriculation at WSSU. I will also encourage the students to consider identifying any opportunities of which new students should take advantage, pitfalls they should avoid, challenges they may encounter, and resources that are available to them.

6. Will minors (participants under the age of 18) be recruited for this study:

No.

7. Is this study funded? No.
   a. Is this study receiving federal funding? N/A
   b. If yes, please provide the grant proposal or any other supporting documents.

8. Do you have a conflict of interest or significant financial interest in this research?

Since I (the researcher) do not have any direct relationship with the participants, there is no conflict of interest in this research.
   a. What does your plan include for managing this conflict of interest and is it being properly followed? N/A

9. HUMAN SUBJECT ETHICS TRAINING

*Please consider taking the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), a free, comprehensive ethics training program for researchers conducting research with human subjects. Just click on the
Appendix B—NCSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) Application Revision

North Carolina State Institutional Review Board
STUDY REVISION REQUEST FORM

To have a study revision approved, please complete this form and send it to ncsuirboffice@ncsu.edu with any necessary attachments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Information</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRB #: 5279</td>
<td>IRB Approval Expiration Date: N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Title: Tres dimensiones de aprendizaje: Language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator(s): Racheal Brooks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail Address for Principal Investigator(s): <a href="mailto:rmbrook2@ncsu.edu">rmbrook2@ncsu.edu</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Contact Phone Number: 404-903-2787</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Sponsor(s): Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail Address for Faculty Sponsor: <a href="mailto:jggayles@ncsu.edu">jggayles@ncsu.edu</a></td>
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</table>

IMPORTANT NOTES:
- Approval for a revision does not change the IRB approval date of your study.
- Do NOT attach a revised protocol. If revisions dramatically change your approved protocol, you may be asked to submit a new or revised protocol later.
- Please make sure to submit all changes to your study materials with revisions/edits clearly tracked or highlighted.
- In the body of this form, please indicate what attachments pertain to what revision.

***************************************************************************
(For IRB office use only)

Review Received: Administrative Expedited Full Board

Review Decision: Approve Approve with Modifications Not Approved

Review Notes:

Reviewer: __________________ Signature: __________________ Date: __________
1. Summarize all requested changes to your study and note the justification for each change. 
   1. I increased the range of students to be recruited from 6-8 to 6-12. This increase will be more conducive to uncovering more themes in the case study.
   
2. I will perform follow-up interviews (in person or via telephone) with student participants if all of the protocol questions are not answered during the first interview.
   
3. I will send the interview audio files to an online transcription service to be transcribed. This will allow me to expedite the transition from data collection to data analysis.
   
4. I added three questions to my interview protocol to address the societal influence of my conceptual framework. This piece was missing from my original interview protocol.

2. Do the requested changes impact the study design or methodology (examples: addition of data collection method, audio/video recording)?
   No ☒ Yes ☐
   If yes, please describe: I expanded my interview protocol by three questions to further address my conceptual framework. Additionally, I will perform follow-up interviews (either in person or via telephone) if necessary. I will also send the audio files to a transcription service. To maintain confidentiality, I will ask students to refrain from stating persons’ names during the interview.

3. Do the requested changes impact the eligibility criteria of participants?
   No ☒ Yes ☐
   If yes, please describe: 

4. Do the requested changes affect the number of participants recruited and/or enrolled?
   No ☒ Yes ☐
   If yes, please describe: Instead of attempting to recruit 6-8 students, I will now try to recruit 6-12 students.

5. Are requested changes limited to editorial and/or administrative changes (examples: change in research staff, wording of informed consent, survey revisions)?
   No ☒ Yes ☐
   If yes, please describe and send revised forms with revisions tracked/highlighted: My informed consent form now indicates that students may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview if time does not permit all questions to be asked in the initial interview.

6. Do the requested changes affect risks and/or benefits expected from participating in the study?
   No ☒ Yes ☐
   If yes, please describe: 

7. Do the requested changes affect anonymity and/or confidentiality?
   No ☒ Yes ☐
   If yes, please describe: 

8. Is there any other information you would like for us to know?
   Attachment 1 (Introductory Email) - I added that students may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview.
Attachment 2 (Preliminary Email Questionnaire) - I corrected the word "minor" to read "major" on question 6.

Attachment 3 (Informed Consent Form) - I corrected the phrase "a class project" to read "dissertation research" and indicated that students may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview.

Attachment 4 (Interview Protocol) - I added the following questions to the interaction dimension of learning to address societal influences on students' learning—a piece that was missing from the original protocol:

1. Think about the reactions you receive when someone learns that you can speak Spanish. How do these reactions affect how you see yourself as a Spanish-language learner?
2. Consider the ways in which you communicate with friends, family, and other individuals on a daily basis. How do these interactions shape how you relate with your peers and instructors in the Spanish classroom?
3. Describe a time when a Spanish instructor adjusted his or her teaching style to appeal to more students. How did this change impact your learning experience?
Appendix C—Introductory Email to Faculty

Good morning [Faculty member]:

My name is Racheal Brooks and I am a Visiting Lecturer of Spanish at North Carolina Central University. I am also a graduate of North Carolina Central University, Georgia State University, and currently a PhD candidate at North Carolina State University’s College of Education. I am completing my doctoral dissertation research regarding Spanish language acquisition at historically Black colleges and universities and would like to learn more about how Winston-Salem State University aids its students in attaining this goal. My study has been approved by my dissertation committee and NC State's Institutional Review Board. Currently, I am in the process of seeking approval from WSSU's Institutional Review Board as well.

The purpose of my research is to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the language content, students’ internal and external motivations, and their interactions within the HBCU learning environment. According to WSSU’s enrollment statistics from the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years, your Spanish language program has enrolled students in upper-level Spanish courses at rates equal to or above the national average. Due to these impressive figures, WSSU is an ideal context to better understand this phenomenon.

I am writing you to request your assistance in identifying students to participate in this study. If you are willing, I would love to come to some of your upper-level Spanish courses in the near future to introduce myself to your students and explain the study in person. Interested students will submit an initial email questionnaire to determine their eligibility for participation. My goal is to recruit six to twelve students who meet any two of the following criteria:

- **Proficiency rating:** He or she has been rated at the level of Superior via the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Assessment of Performance Toward Proficiency in Languages,
- **Course completion:** He or she studied in a university Spanish-language program at the advanced level of courses listed at 3000 or above,
- **Declaration of Spanish major:** He or she has been enrolled in various college-level language courses with the aim of earning a baccalaureate degree or in the discipline as indicated by the declaration of a Spanish major
- **Study abroad experience:** He or she spent an extensive period of time (5 or more weeks) in another Spanish-speaking country to attain fluency.

Each student will participate in a face-to-face interview that will last approximately one hour on WSSU’s campus. If necessary, I may contact the student by phone or email to ask follow-up questions. The interviews will be recorded using an audiotape for accuracy. Participants
will also write a letter to a hypothetical incoming first year student in which they will give advice about how to succeed in learning Spanish at WSSU. Additionally, I will keep the names of all students and instructors completely confidential and will change their names for any future publications or presentations. Each student participant will submit a signed informed consent form (see attached form), and will know that their participation is completely voluntary.

As a graduate of a Spanish program at a historically Black university myself, and now as an instructor of Spanish, I have a deep desire to learn how we as language instructors at HBCUs can help our students become proficient in the Spanish language. This investigation will fill a gap in the current literature regarding the beliefs and practices of successful Spanish language learners at HBCUs. Hopefully, the lessons learned from this study will aid our colleagues in the Spanish language instruction community to better understand and better theorize among their own students.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach me by telephone at 404-903-2787 (or at my office at 919-530-6338) or by email at rmbrook2@ncsu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration of my request, and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Racheal Brooks
Appendix D—WSSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter

Ms. Rachael Brooks  
Leadership, Policy & Adult and Higher Education  
North Carolina State University

Others: Joy Gaston Gayles, Uchenna Vasser

Refer to IRB #: WSSU IRB # 2986-15-0033  
North Carolina State University (NCSU) IRB # 5279

November 18, 2014

Dear Ms. Brooks:

The Winston-Salem State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) along with the Provost Officer has reviewed the “Tres dimensiones de aprendizaje: Language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at my HBCU” project, upon the request of Dr. Uchenna Vasser, Associate Professor of Spanish, World Languages and Cultures.

The WSSU IRB will rely upon the review and continuing oversight performed by NCSU. NCSU will follow written procedures for reporting its findings and actions to the WSSU IRB.

You are granted permission to start your study as described effective immediately. The NCSU determined that this study was not Human Subject research and would not be subject to continuing review. Please keep the WSSU IRB advised of any changes that may require the project to be re-classified as human subject research.

You are responsible for obtaining a signed consent form from each research subject you use in this project using the submitted form if this applies. Each form must be labeled with this IRB #. You should retain the originals for your records. Please contact Stephanie Evans, Compliance Officer, (336) 750-2982, or evansst@wssu.edu if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Dr. Naomi Hall-Byers, IRB Chair
Dr. Dionne Roberts, IRB Co-Chair

Cc: Valerie Howard, Director of Sponsored Programs  
Stephanie Evans, Compliance Officer  
Uchenna Vasser, Associate Professor of Spanish, World Languages and Cultures

Winston-Salem State University is an Equal Opportunity Employer
Appendix E—Introductory Email to Students

Good day [WSSU Spanish Student]:

My name is Racheal Brooks and I am a Spanish instructor at North Carolina Central University. I am also a graduate of North Carolina Central University, Georgia State University, and currently a Ph.D. student at North Carolina State University’s College of Education. I am completing my doctoral dissertation research regarding Spanish language acquisition at historically Black colleges and universities and would like to learn more about how Winston-Salem State University aids its students in attaining this goal. The purpose of my research is to investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the language content, students’ internal and external motivations, and their interactions within the HBCU learning environment.

I am writing you to request your participation in my research study. If you choose to participate, you will:

• submit an initial email questionnaire to determine your eligibility
• participate in a face-to-face interview (approximately 1 hour) on WSSU’s campus, and
• write a letter of advice to a hypothetical incoming first year student about how to succeed in learning Spanish at WSSU.

Please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will submit a signed informed consent form. I will keep your name confidential and will change your name for any future publications or presentations.

As a graduate of a Spanish program at a historically Black university myself, and now as an instructor of Spanish, I have a deep desire to learn how language instructors at HBCUs can help you, as a student, become proficient in the Spanish language. This investigation will fill a gap in the current literature regarding the beliefs and practices of successful Spanish language learners at HBCUs. Hopefully, the lessons learned from this study will aid my colleagues in the Spanish language instruction community to better understand and better theorize among their own students.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach me by telephone at 404-903-2787 (or 919-530-6338) or by email at rmbrook2@ncsu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration of my request, and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Racheal Brooks
Appendix F—Preliminary Email Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preliminary Email Questionnaire</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant (<em>Pseudonym</em>):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Why did you choose to study the Spanish language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What do you enjoy about studying the Spanish language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is Spanish your native language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Please list the levels and titles of all Spanish courses you have taken as an undergraduate student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Have you declared a major in the Spanish language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. If the answer to the previous question is “no,” do you intend to declare a minor in the Spanish language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Have you been evaluated using an American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview? If so, at which proficiency level were you rated? (<em>novice low, novice mid, novice high, intermediate low, intermediate mid, intermediate high, advanced low, advanced mid, advanced high, superior, distinguished</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Have you studied abroad for a period of at least four weeks in a Spanish-speaking country? If yes, in which country/countries have you studied abroad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. If you have not studied abroad in a Spanish-speaking country, do you intend to do so?</td>
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</table>
## Appendix G—Interview Protocol

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee (Pseudonym)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Introductory Questions:**
- Help me understand what led you to study the Spanish language in college?
- What compelled you to study Spanish beyond the level required for graduation?

**Dimension 1: Content dimension of learning: knowledge, understanding, skills**
- What types of reading and writing activities have aided you in becoming more proficient in Spanish? In what ways have they improved your proficiency?
- Help me understand the types of in-class listening and speaking activities that you have found to be most helpful? How are these activities helpful?
- Tell me about any additional activities in which you engage in your free time that have helped you become a better Spanish student?
- (…follow-up) What compelled you to participate in these activities? How have they helped you become more proficient in Spanish?
- Describe instances in which you have been given an opportunity to contribute to the content being taught in the classroom.
- (…follow-up) How does your inclusion in (or exclusion from) the decision-making process impact your experience as a student?
- How often and in what ways do you prefer to receive feedback from your instructors?
- (…follow-up) How does receiving feedback in this manner help you grow as a learner of Spanish?

**Dimension 2: Incentive dimension of learning: motivation, emotion, volition**
- Describe an instance in which a Spanish instructor encouraged you to complete a task that initially seemed challenging.
- What steps did you take to help you to understand confusing or difficult aspects of the task?
- In what ways were your educational and personal growth impacted by completing this task?
- Who has been your most influential Spanish instructor?
- (…follow-up) In what ways has that instructor impacted your success in studying Spanish?
### Dimension 3: Interaction dimension of learning: *action, communication, cooperation*

What kinds of activities have encouraged you to get to know your classmates?

Describe the relationships and interactions that you believe were most helpful in becoming a successful learner of Spanish.

(…follow-up) How did you go about establishing these relationships or seeking out these interactions?

What kinds of organizations on campus have allowed you to improve your understanding of or comfort with the Spanish language?

What factors influenced your decisions to utilize campus resources or participate in clubs and student organizations related to Spanish language and associated cultures?

If you noticed a classmate struggling to understand the material in your Spanish class, what would you do? **OR** What would you do if you were the instructor and a student of yours was struggling? Why?

Describe any summer internships or jobs in which you utilized your knowledge of the Spanish language and/or associated cultures. How did you secure this job?

### Relationship between content and incentive dimensions

What types of interactive activities do you like to do outside of class that help you better understand and become more comfortable with using the Spanish language?

How does practicing different skill sets (reading, writing, listening, speaking) impact your level of comfort in using the Spanish language?

How do your instructors address the topic of under-represented populations (i.e. women, minorities, etc.) and their relation to the Spanish-speaking world?

… (follow up) In what ways do you think the study of these topics (or lack thereof) has shaped your opinions regarding studying Spanish?

### Relationship between incentive and interaction dimensions

How do your instructors relate course content to your personal, educational, and career goals?

How have you found ways to relate what you study to your own personal, educational, and career goals?

In what ways has “doing well” in Spanish influenced your future personal and professional plans?

What do you value most in an instructor-student relationship in the Spanish classroom?

How does your membership in an under-represented population (i.e. women, minorities, majority student at an HBCU, etc.) impact how you interact with your peers and instructors?

How do you use your unique perspective to succeed in the Spanish classroom?

### Relationship between content and interaction dimensions
Describe a time when you used your knowledge of the Spanish language to solve a real-world problem.

In what ways are you given an opportunity to present original work to your peers?

How do your instructors reach out to you when you are having problems understanding the material?

**Additional Questions**

In three words, how would you summarize your experience with studying Spanish at this institution? How do these words represent your journey?
Appendix H—Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Tres dimensiones de aprendizaje: Language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU

Principal Investigator: Racheal Brooks    Faculty Sponsor: Joy Gaston Gayles, Ph.D.

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue as part of a class project. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
Investigate the language learning beliefs of successful Spanish language learners at an HBCU as they relate to the content, incentive, and interactive dimensions of learning.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a background survey (20 min); participate in a personal interview (about 60 minutes); and write a letter to a hypothetical incoming first year student in which you will give advice about how to succeed in learning Spanish at Winston-Salem State University.

Risks
There are no overt risks to participating in this study.

Benefits
Knowledge to be gained from students’ perspectives on best practices in the learning of Spanish at an HBCU.
Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on two password-protected external hard drives in two of the researcher’s offices. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

Compensation
You will not receive anything for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Racheal Brooks (rmbrook2@ncsu.edu).

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent to Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature ___________________________ Date ______________

Investigator's signature________________________ Date ______________
Appendix I—Letter of Advice

Letter of Advice

It is the beginning of a new academic year at Winston-Salem State University, and several first-year students have expressed interest in declaring majors in Spanish. Two of these students are Kamisha Parker and Trey Ellis, longtime friends from the same hometown. Noting your outstanding performance in your Spanish classes, your professor asks you to write a letter to one of the new students to give them some advice on how to succeed as well.

Assignment:
Write a letter to either Kamisha or Trey in which you give advice about how to succeed in learning Spanish at Winston-Salem State University. Your letter can be as long as you like but must be at least one page in length.

Points to Consider:
- Introduce yourself.
- Share your language learning background.
- Explain your exposure to other languages and cultures prior to attending WSSU.
- Identify any opportunities of which Kamisha or Trey should take advantage.
- Describe pitfalls to avoid.
- List challenges they may encounter.
- List resources available to Spanish language students.
Appendix J—Within-Case Analysis Coding Template

Within-case Analysis of Participant’s Learning Experiences in Relation to Illeris’ (2002) Three Dimensions of Learning Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event/Activity/Learning Experience</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Dimension(s) of Learning&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Relevance&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<sup>a</sup>Dimension of learning or combination of dimensions to which the event, activity, or learning experience pertains—content, incentive, interaction.

<sup>b</sup>Perceived relevance of event, activity, or learning experience participant attributes to the Spanish language acquisition process.
Appendix K—Cross-case Comparison Coding Template

<table>
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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Salient Events/Activities/Learning Experiences</th>
<th>Codes</th>
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\(^a\)Dimension of learning or combination of dimensions to which the event, activity, or learning experience pertains—content, incentive, interaction.

\(^b\)Perceived relevance of event, activity, or learning experience participants attribute to the Spanish language acquisition process.