UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):

Linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines[2], particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.[3]   Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

METHOD

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning they ascribe to those experiences[4]; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.[5] Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 33 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked them to respond to four

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[1]   Meghan Oxley not only interviewed seniors; she did the initial analysis of responses, which helped make our work in OEA much easier. We thank her for her help in this project.

[2]   Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

[3]   Beyer, et al., 2007.

[4]   Merriam, 2001.

[5]   One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.

2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?

3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?

4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

The Linguistics adviser added a fifth question to these four, asking students whether or not they could have used additional support in the major or whether they had any additional feedback to offer.

In addition, all advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with survey customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students. Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method[6], an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories on students' comments.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Senior-level courses, particularly capstone or capstone-like classes, are those which students often say are their most challenging and satisfying. Although interviewing students as they applied for graduation meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

LINGUISTICS DEPARTMENT RESULTS

The Linguistics Department was one of the UW ACES' 33 participating departments. Meghan Oxley, then the academic adviser in Linguistics, asked 35 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all agreed. The 35 students who were interviewed represented about 65% of the 54 seniors in Linguistics who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.[7] Of those 35 students, 34 were working

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[6] Merriam, 2001.

[7] The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting (https://uwprofiles.uw.edu/Viz/View/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes)

to complete the General Linguistics track option and one reported being enrolled in the Romance Linguistics track option.

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

Twenty-three (68%) of the students interviewed reported having three quarters until graduation. Six (17%) said they had two quarters remaining; four still had four quarters to go before graduation; and two students indicated having just one quarter remaining.

Overall, the 35 interviewees listed 12 courses in the Linguistics major, all 400-level courses, as the sites where they experienced their most significant challenges. Syntax II, listed by 13 students, was the course mentioned most frequently. In addition, two students listed English courses and one student mentioned a Speech and Hearing Sciences course.

The list of courses in the major and the number of students who identified them (only one if not otherwise noted) were as follows:

LING 430: Pidgins and Creole Languages
LING 432: Sociolinguistics I (5)
LING 442: Semantics I
LING 449: Second Language Acquisition (2)
LING 450: Introduction to Linguistic Phonetics (7)
LING 451: Phonology I (6)
LING 453: Experimental Phonetics
LING 454: Methods in Comparative Linguistics
LING 461: Syntax I (6)
LING 462: Syntax II (13)
LING 472: Introduction to Computational Linguistics (2)
LING 479: Semantics II

ENGL 478: Language and Social Policy
ENGL 479: Language Variation and Language Policy in North American
SPHSC 302: Phonetics

Students were also asked the following question: "Which of the following core Linguistics courses have you completed?" As the list below indicates, most of the interviewees had completed four of the six courses at the time of their interviews:

LING 432: Sociolinguistics I (20)
LING 442: Semantics I (9)
LING 450: Introduction to Linguistic Phonetics (24)
LING 451: Phonology I (15)
LING 461: Syntax I (29)
LING 462: Syntax II (21)

1. Students' Greatest Challenges

Students were asked: "What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This

can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major."

Three major themes emerged from students' responses.

A course. When asked about their greatest challenges in the major, all 35 students cited a particular course with nearly half mentioning either Syntax I or II. Of those students who cited a course, 37% indicated that it was a project required in the course that made it particularly challenging and 26% noted that writing in the course was a challenge.[8] When students mentioned both a course and a specific aspect of the course their responses were coded in multiple categories. The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *I think both of my Syntax classes were most challenging because it wasn't something that comes easily to me. It wasn't like "oh, click, got it." I had to work really hard. Also it didn't interest me that much so that made it hard motivation-wise. I think I did okay on homework and projects and exams, but it was day to day in class understanding the lecture, understanding the readings, and then trying to apply them on my own to things that weren't in the book or use it in any kind of not homework way.*

- *As far as the courses that I've taken, the most challenging thing would be the syntax course. I didn't have any specific projects I had to do in Syntax I, but it was just a difficult concept for me to get a grasp on initially, so it presented the most challenge for me.*

- *I think it was the Syntax II squib. It was the distribution of "kolwiek" (a particle that attaches to questions in Polish) in complex free relatives.*

- *I thought definitely Syntax was the hardest. It was just very abstract. The second course I thought was more difficult, but both of them [were challenging]. Syntax I didn't have anything besides tests and homework, but Syntax II had the paper. It wasn't too bad. It was kind of fun. It was a little difficult, but I liked it.*

- *I think some of the abstract parts of Syntax II. That was the hardest to kind of wrap my head around compared to Syntax I, where you could at least think of an example in your head of what was happening. The course as a whole was challenging.*

Projects. Thirteen (37%) interviewees said that a project had presented them with their most significant challenges and five of those students specified that it was a final project. In the words of five students identifying projects as their greatest challenge in the major:

- *I would say some of the end-of-the-year projects that we've done, both in Syntax I and Sociolinguistics [were the most challenging—those are the two I've done so far—because both of those encourage, or actually require, independent research in the field.*

- *The final project for Linguistics 450. I was comparing Finnish to Hungarian phonetics and working with the long and short consonants in Finnish. That was kind of problematic, especially because I was also learning Estonian at the time, which doesn't narrow me down enough you know, but which I assumed would have a similar set up of how they distinguish geminates from non-geminates, which wasn't the case.*

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[8] When students mentioned both a course and a specific aspect of the course, we coded their responses in multiple categories.

- *The most challenging project I did was for Linguistics 451. I had to do a project about the phonology of a language. It was on the phonology of a language that we had to choose, and I chose Spanish because I was familiar with it, but it was still challenging.*

- *I'd say probably my phonetics class. There was a final project, where you had to lay out the speech sounds of a language and talk about it.*

- *Probably the final project in Sociolinguistics I, the dialect thing. We had to have people we know complete a map and stuff too and then analyze everybody's answers. That was super-interesting and required a lot of thought.*

A paper. Nine (26%) interviewees commented that a paper presented them with the most significant challenge in the major, with six of those students specifying that it was a final paper. Some examples of this category of response include:

- *I think in the context of stretching thinking, it was probably Phonology, my final paper there. We had to write up a phonology problem like one that would go into a textbook using data and the general phonological system of a foreign language that we didn't speak, that we weren't familiar with. I really enjoyed that. It was kind of interesting to be on the other side of the textbook problem for a change and have to come up with one rather than just solve it.*

- *So in one of my electives, Language Variation and Language Policy in North America, ENGL 479, at the end of the quarter we had a final paper, and it was pretty broad. We could talk about anything we wanted, which made it kind of harder but it kind of gave us some leeway to choose what we wanted to do.*

- *I would say the squib at the end of Syntax II. I was writing a paper about negation in double object constructions, and whenever I had one hypothesis about the syntactic relationship among the constituents it was never perfectly clear that I was right or if I was right, why. So at every juncture I had to think of a variety of new sentences in order to justify my hypothesis, so the amount of examples that I was thinking of grew exponentially as I went along.*

- *So I wrote a paper in Syntax II, it was a review of an academic syntactic paper on ergativity in Inuktitut and that was really, really challenging because first of all the paper I had to read was 60 pages and it was really dense information on a fairly obscure syntactic function already, and I had to write a paper that was interpreting it and explaining it, not in laymen's terms but rephrasing. Just understanding the academic paper I read was the hardest part.*

Assignments. Five (14%) interviewees explained that assignments that they were required to complete posed the greatest challenge in the Linguistics major. In their own words:

- *I found that Syntax II, the assignment was just to look up a published work and then lecture on that work and then it's a little bit difficult because it's like - it's different from a textbook. A textbook lays it out pretty easily. When you go into someone's research, there's no standard way of how things are written. It's overwhelming sometimes because it might go beyond what you're doing in the class. And to understand that well enough to lecture on it might be challenging.*

- *The hardest class for me was probably Linguistics 450 or Linguistics 451. I lump them together because I had the same teacher. The assignments were just not what I'm used to or not my forte. It was not something I was naturally good at, so the assignments were a lot of effort and a lot of frustration.*

Readings. Five (14%) interviewees noted that readings were a major challenge in the major particularly as they completed assignments and projects. In the words of two participants:

- *I think the readings we did about a lot of theory for my language policy class, because we went over critical theory and postmodernism.*

- *I think the most challenging thing was in Syntax II how we had to read an actual paper written by someone working in the field currently and then talk about the things we thought could have been wrong and critique them.*

Three students mentioned the following as a challenging feature of the Linguistics major:

- **Exams (3).** *In my semantic theory course, Semantics II, we had a take home midterm and a take home final, and those—I mean the homework assignments too, but mostly those—were the most challenging and funnest at the same time.*

In addition, one student each mentioned the following challenging aspects of the Linguistics major:

- Lab in Phonetics
- The entire major

2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

When asked what had made those activities challenging, 27 (77%) of the interviewees identified a single challenge. One major and two minor themes emerged from the data.

Abstract/unfamiliar subject matter. Twelve (34%) interviewees explained that the activities were challenging because the subject matter was both new and abstract in nature. Moreover, four of the ten students specifically mentioned syntax as a particularly challenging concept to grasp. In the words of some of these students:

- *The things you were learning was stuff you either never thought about or even after having it explained to was still hard to understand. I don't know how to explain.*

- *Syntax was a language I'd never studied before, so not only are you trying to figure out the syntax, you were trying to wrap your head around a language you'd never seen before. That of course makes it more challenging.*

- *Well it was the actual implementation of phonological rules and figuring out how to formulate them. And then also dealing with loan words and the abstraction of underlying forms as they related to loan words was really hard for me to wrap my mind around.*

- *Just the nature of the material. Syntax is difficult. It's just weird to think about these sentences in such a deep way. The concepts I guess were kind of abstract to me.*

- *Just what really are geminate consonants? So geminate versus ambisyllabic versus short, and the distribution in languages.*

Reading scholarly research. Six (17%) students mentioned that the activities were challenging because they were required to read and comprehend scholarly articles, which often went into much greater depth than classroom learning. In their own words:

- *I would say that the interpretation of the academic paper was definitely the hardest part.*

- *We had to look at scholarly articles, like research that people had done, and kind of draw conclusions from that and present it. So it was hard applying what we had learned in class to stuff that was much more advanced than what we knew.*

- *When you read about somebody's research, oftentimes you would encounter something that goes beyond the scope of the textbook, and that means you have to do extra reading to understand what they're saying.*

- *I guess just that it was professional or within the field, something actually new and professional. It was like a professional level paper, like a journal, and not something directed for an undergraduate. So I was having to like catch up, to essentially learn things that were outside of what we'd been going over, and digest the way in which professional papers are written.*

Open-ended work/independent research. Four (11%) interviewees commented that the activities in the major were a challenge because they were often open-ended and sometimes required them to conduct largely independent research.   The following responses illustrate this category of response:

- *It was very open-ended, it wasn't like we were directed on, you know, "there's a specific problem, solve it," or like a book sets out a way for you to apply that problem and solve it. You come up with a hypothesis all on your own. They give you the structure for how to do research but you're doing all the research yourself.*

- *Well, it was more self-directed, and it was more difficult for me to sort of figure out what the standards would be for that kind of work.*

Two or three students each mentioned the following as reasons why aspects of the Linguistics major were challenging:

- **Applying theory (3).** *It's not only taking in the historical background of the issue, but it's also an ongoing debate and then you need to attach that to real world problems.*

- **Understanding the material well enough to teach/present to others (3).** *You have to understand it well enough to stand in front of the class and be confident to teach about it.*

- **Required a different way of thinking (2***). It was something like really foreign. I'd never encountered that before. But it made a lot of sense to me at the same time. I really, really liked learning about it. It was a completely different way of thinking than anything I'd done, other than a little bit of stuff in linguistics or I guess logic maybe.*

- **Writing (2).** *For a project of 15 pages there's a certain technique you have to use to make every individual part relevant or interesting. And that means more information, laying out that information, more sources. That's different for 15 page papers. That was the first time I had to write one.*

- **Not interested in subject matter (2).** *I think interest was the biggest thing. Going in depth about a subject that wasn't exactly the part of linguistics that I enjoyed or that interested me from the beginning.*

In addition, one student each mentioned the following as reasons why courses and/or activities in the Linguistics major were a challenge:

- Lack of online resources
- Professor not present to answer questions
- Peers not willing to participate fully in group work
- Finding time to meet with group members
- Required to understand a foreign language

3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?

The majority (69%) of interviewees identified a single source of help for meeting the challenges they described. Overall, students' responses yielded three main themes.

My own efforts. Twenty-six (74%) of the interviewees explained that their ability to meet the challenges posed by the Linguistics major were a result of their own efforts. Students explained that they put in the time and effort required to succeed including attending and paying attention in class, reading and re-reading the text, doing additional library and/or online research as needed, and managing their time more effectively. As seven of the interviewees explained:

- *[I did] the things you have to do if you want to do well in a course— the readings, go to class, pay attention, and stay active and participate in your courses. I wish I could say good planning.*

- *I guess it was making myself familiar with the theory we were working with because although it did seem intuitive after I got down certain concepts, it took practice and looking at things over and over again to actually get it.*

- *I think what helped me a lot was just rereading the material.*

- *I basically just had to learn how to do what I was planning to do as I was planning to do it. I had to spend many, many hours. I think I stayed up for like three days making the whole thing work because every time I would create one grammatical rule and get that to work, another one that was already working would stop working.*

- *I think for the SPHSC course it was just a matter of learning to time manage a little bit better. What was being asked wasn't impossible, it was doable, but it was just a matter of a conflict for me. So definitely better time management.*

- *I read the paper like 10 times over. It's like reading a paper like that, every sentence is packed full of information, so when I'd read an entire paragraph I had forgotten what the paragraph was about by the end of it.*

- *I think just the classwork we had been doing up to that point—the readings, assignments, and lectures— those all established the foundation. And then from that we were able to explore on our own things that were related but beyond that level.*

Talking with professors. Ten (40%) interviewees commented that talking with professors informally, in class, and as part of office hours, helped them meet the challenges posed by the Linguistics major. In their own words:

- *I had to go to office hours. I don't go to office hours a lot, so it was finally one of those things where it was like, "There is some stuff in here that is too deep to wade through myself." I needed someone who had more experience to be like, "This is what they're saying." It helped to ask the right questions and point me in the direction that helped me to think what I thought about the paper. And then I had to go and meet with the professor to actually go over the specifics of it and have him teach me what was going on and draw it out with the tree and everything.*

- *I think it was really crucial that both of my syntax instructors had devoted a lot of class time for questions. People would ask questions and then the instructors might not have an answer off the top of their head. So they actually took a moment out of class and said let's pause and see what the situation is like. So their examples helped me, their starting point, their process.*

- *Really just working through that phonetics book and talking to the professor about it.*

- *Going to office hours helped a lot.*

Working with peers/group work. Eight (23%) interviewees commented that the opportunity to work with peers helped them to meet the challenges they encountered in the major. In the words of four of these students:

- *In that class in particular, working with other students was really what helped the best. There were a few of us that would get together and work out all the problems. There would be a solution, but if you didn't see a path towards it, it would lead somewhere else, so you needed everyone to figure out which direction was right.*

- *Studying with other people in the class was really helpful, because they would have similar frustrations and we could kind of bond over it and also work out how to do these things.*

- *I think having partners in that research project, somebody who we would spend two hours a day bouncing ideas off each other and going over our homework. Having someone else who understood linguistics, understood the research we were doing, and being able to talk to one another about it helped a lot. Having someone right there you can talk to versus when you're in a big group you can get impersonal. Having one person you can really get a dialogue going.*

- *The fact that the professor emphasized working together with peers was helpful too.*

Individual students noted the following as helpful as they met the challenges in the Linguistics major:

- Previous knowledge
- Formatting knowledge
- Librarian's help

4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?

We asked students what they felt they had learned by meeting the challenges they had described, and about 66% of the interviewees mentioned more than one lesson learned. One strong and two minor themes emerged from their responses.

Specific content knowledge. A particularly strong theme in response to this question, noted by 63% of participants, was that students had learned specific content knowledge in the process of meeting the challenges described. Eight of those participants specifically mentioned syntax in their responses. The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *I think it really opened my eyes to a different world of syntax and even syntax in different languages.*

- *I learned a lot about what we were studying for the projects. I learned about the syntax of the language. I learned about the attitudes towards different dialects in the US, which we were studying for sociolinguistics.*

- *I've learned about how language is broken down and semantics. Honestly, I think it's made me not as good of a communicator in everyday situations because I think of language in this semantic way now. I don't know. It was really interesting. That was like my favorite class that I've taken at UW.*

- *Well first of all just about vowel-glide interaction in French. I was able to get a better and more complete understanding of the way certain rules interact in the language because it wasn't just a data set of a language that I didn't know. It was a language that I knew and could speak and was doing research on. Formulating rules is kind of mathematical and it's precise and it's a skill of its own learning how to formulate those.*

- *I learned about stereotypes of different areas of America and the way they speak there.*

- *The whole idea of the class, the material that was covered in the class. If I didn't do the project I might have hard time understanding it, but through the project I understood better. Through the project I think I was more interested in the subject in the class.*

- *I guess I learned how to deconstruct policies in a way that was really allowing me to understand the problem at a deeper level and consider all the different factors that may have had an effect on that society.*

- *I learned a ton about how ergativity works in the world's languages.*

Greater understanding of research. Six (17%) interviewees reported that they had gained both a greater understanding of the research process in the field of Linguistics and their ability to conduct research, as a result of the challenges posed by the major. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *The work definitely opened up my researching ability. Before that I was just kind of relying a lot on the internet. But after that project I realized that I needed to outsource my ability to research things and not rely on one source*

- *I think from doing these assignments and other sorts of assignments in the major I have a better understanding of the sort of content that is involved with and is created by*

academia in general and also more specifically linguistics. And I suppose how data is collected and interpreted.

- *I learned that conducting research and designing research is pretty easy. Actually conducting it and getting funding would be the hard part. I thought the biggest problem would be finding something to study, not actually doing the study. And then trying to find something that really relates to important stuff not just a study about something that doesn't really have any significance, because you have to design something that's applicable.*

Gained study skills. Four (11%) interviewees commented that their study skills had improved after meeting the challenges in the major. Specifically, they reported having a greater sense of the importance of putting in extra time and effort as well the value in having good time-management skills. In their own words:

- *I learned that sometimes you just have to work on something for a really, really long time before it will be satisfactory, and that taking a break is always a good thing. I would get so frustrated and not allow myself to stop because I was frustrated that I couldn't get it, so I'd keep trying to get it, but really I had to calm down before I could get anything to work.*

- *I think I learned some time management because I worked on it ahead of time and later when I had to hand in my final paper and do my presentation I wasn't very stressed out about it.*

Other. Two or three students said that they had learned the following:

- **The importance of seeking out help from the TA's/professors** (3). *I think to make sure I go talk to the professor, and when they're not going to be present in the exam before, to go ask them. And coming from BIOCHEM we don't even really talk to professors. A lot of time we talk to professors just to see if we can get familiar with the professors, not to actually ask questions. Most of them are answered in the book or lecture notes already. But for Linguistics, we need to communicate more with the professors.*

- **Domain-specific writing skills** (2). *I learned how to write proofs in prose. What that means is that I learned how to take research data from seemingly unrelated fields, write an argument in such a way that the argument is both valid and sound, incorporating that research data, all the while making it interesting prose.*

In addition, single individuals said that they had learned the following by completing the challenges they had described:

- Presentation skills
- Value of bonding with classmates
- Link between theory and real-world
- How to overcome own preconceptions regarding syntax
- She/he doesn't like syntax
- Graduate student instructors are more approachable

5. *Places where students could have used more support/other feedback*

The Linguistics adviser added an additional question to the interview, asking students whether or not they could have used additional support in the major or whether they had any additional feedback to offer. Two-thirds (66%) of the participants provided a response.

Nine students offered the following individual suggestions for improvement:

- Provide more course information online
- Have more courses offer office hours via Skype
- Offer more prerequisites on the core electives
- Offer more electives in the linguistics major
- Provide more opportunities for peer editing
- Fewer online and more pen-and-pencil assessments

- *I wish there had been more discussion in the classes about the colloquia that are offered. I get the emails, but I feel like if teachers talked about it more and what it was about, I would be more willing to go. Or if they made it an extra credit opportunity. Because they seem interesting, but I didn't want to go by myself.*

- *I do have one thought as I've progressed through. The Linguistics program itself—it feels as though you're getting a major in a lot of little majors. You have five different areas you can branch off from. And a lot of the time once you get up to the highest level of one, it links back to the bottom of the other levels. And so it kind of feels a little redundant in a way, but at the same time it's good that it's interconnected.*

- *I think if you were to change the department requirements, to do 433 or 449, because if you just took semantics you wouldn't necessarily design a research project. It makes it seem real and not just an academic exercise.*

Nine interviewees offered general praise for the Linguistics program. In the words of four students:

- *I think all the professors for this program are great, and you're a great counselor as well. It's a shame this program is so small because I think it would be cool to have more classes available and more opportunities in general to do internships or research, things like that. I think myself and a lot of my peers feel that way.*

- *Definitely something I would want to say is that the availability of classes during the summer is really good. I think I'm pretty happy with my experience in Linguistics.*

- *Everyone's very open and willing to help.*

- *I feel like a lot of people in the department are great, really awesome, have passion about what they're teaching. That's great. It's really fun to be in class.*

One or two students mentioned the following when asked for additional feedback:

- Minor scheduling challenges (2)
- Interested in more classes in historical linguistics
- Would like to learn more about language revitalization projects

- *I guess I feel like there are so many cool classes I want to take them all and I can't fit them into my schedule, but it's not really the department's fault. Might have also been a feature of me being a double degree student.*

SUMMARY

When asked about their most challenging work in the major, all students cited a course with nearly one-half mentioning either Syntax I, as the example in the box that follows this summary illustrate, or Syntax II. Moreover, interviewees commonly mentioned that projects or papers, particularly those that were course-wide, were a significant challenge in the Linguistics major. In the words of one student:

> *I would say some of the end-of-the-year projects that we've done, both in Syntax I and Sociolinguistics [were the most challenging—those are the two I've done so far—because both of those encourage, or actually require, independent research in the field.*

Students also commented that assignments, exams, and readings presented them with significant challenges as they navigated through the major.

Students explained that aspects of the Linguistics major were challenging because the subject matter was novel and often abstract in nature and this was particularly true of syntax courses. In addition, students commented that the activities in the major were challenging because they were required to read scholarly research that went above and beyond typical textbook material. As one participant stated:

> *We had to look at scholarly articles, like research that people had done, and kind of draw conclusions from that and present it. So it was hard applying what we had learned in class to stuff that was much more advanced than what we knew.*

Students also noted that activities in the major often posed a challenge because they were required to conduct independent research, had to figure out how to apply theory to real-world issues, and had to understand the material well enough to present it to others in the class.

When asked what they did or learned that enabled them to meet the challenges discussed above, students most commonly cited their own efforts which included completing the readings, paying attention in class, doing additional library and/or online research, and managing their time more effectively. Students also mentioned that talking with professors both in class and in office hours was instrumental to their success in the major. Finally, students noted that working with peers in informal study groups, in-class group work, and as research project partners, was particularly beneficial.

When asked what they learned as they met the challenges discussed above, students were most likely to report that they gained content knowledge specific to the Linguistics major, particularly related to syntax. Moreover, students indicated that they had gained both a greater understanding of the research process in the field of Linguistics and had the opportunity to conduct their own independent research. Students also explained that they gained study skills including a greater appreciation of the value of hard work as well as time-management skills. In the words of one student:

> *I learned that sometimes you just have to work on something for a really, really long time before it will be satisfactory, and that taking a break is always a good thing. I would get so frustrated and not allow myself to stop because I was frustrated that I*

couldn't get it, so I'd keep trying to get it, but really I had to calm down before I could get anything to work.

In sum, students' responses broadly reflect the learning goals put forth by the Linguistics major including a greater understanding of the structure and use of language and the critical thinking skills needed to understand and engage in scholarly research in the field of Linguistics.

Finally, in response to the UW ACES interview questions, Linguistics majors viewed the challenges they described as rewarding, as these student quotations indicate:

- *It was kind of fun. It was a little difficult, but I liked it.*

- *In my semantic theory course, Semantics II, we had a take home midterm and a take home final, and those—I mean the homework assignments too, but mostly those—were the most challenging and funnest at the same time.*

- *We had to write up a phonology problem like one that would go into a textbook using data and the general phonological system of a foreign language that we didn't speak, that we weren't familiar with. I really enjoyed that.*

These strongly positive responses to challenge are consistent with research on student learning, which shows that when an assignment is challenging for students and when instructors help students meet those challenges, students are engaged in their courses and, therefore, learn more than when coursework is easy.

One Student's Responses to All Four Questions

Course where greatest challenges occurred: LING 461: Syntax I and LING 432: Sociolinguistics I

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? *I would say some of the end of the year projects that we've done, both in Syntax I and Sociolinguistics,[were the most challenging]--those are the two I've done so far—because both of those encourage, or actually require, independent research in the field.*

Q2. Why was it challenging? *Just the fact that we were doing raw data and applying what we had been discussing all quarter to this data. I think it was very interesting. And it sort of had a nice sense of accomplishment at the end, because even if someone had already analyzed the phenomenon, you were doing it yourself, so you have more of a sense of accomplishment.*

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? *The things you had to do if you want to do well in a course. Do the readings, go to class, pay attention. Stay active and participate in your courses. I wish I could say good planning.*

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? *I learned a lot about what we were studying for the projects. I learned about the syntax of the language. I learned about the attitudes towards different dialects in the US, which we were studying for sociolinguistics.*

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