



Empowering Non-traditional Foreign Language Students: Strategies from a Community College to Increase Completion and Retention

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Abstract

Tarrant County College is located in Fort Worth, Texas, and it is composed of 6 campuses throughout the county. TCC serves students from a diverse population, including older, first generation, dual credit high school, commuter and working students. Since the great majority of our students are non-traditional and first time in college, our students face unique challenges to complete and stay engaged while attending TCC. To enhance and facilitate their success during their college experience, the Spanish department works diligently and collaborates with other disciplines, college offices, student organizations, and universities. This collaboration ensures that our students stay engaged, complete their degrees and transfer to 4-year institutions. This study will present practices that empower students. The Spanish Department has developed practices that enable us to collaborate with higher education institutions through our university campus visits, cultural workshops, and student affair activities. The goal of this study is to create an inclusive learning environment by facilitating successful strategies that empower all students during and beyond their college experience.

Keywords: engagement; success; collaboration; community; support

1. Overview and Background

The number of non-traditional students attending community colleges in the United States has increased considerably recently (Kennedy, 2023; Chen & Hossler, 2017). According to Kennedy (2023), the non-traditional students require a different support from the community colleges the students are attending to accommodate their needs to facilitate a successful performance. At our institution, a community college located in the northern region of the state of Texas, we have noticed that non-traditional students enrolled in our foreign language courses encounter unique challenges that can influence their performance in their classes and our institution retention and completion rates.

Non-traditional students in community colleges vary from adults who are older than 25 years old, have a fulltime job, and often have family and financial commitments (Chen, 2015). The Spanish Department at our institution has recognized the valuable importance of our non-traditional students as we have several students who come from a diverse background, students who are dual credit students (taking high school and college courses at the same time), Hispanic students (whose primary language is Spanish), first generation students, retired and veterans students among others.

1.1. The Role of Community Colleges

Since the beginning of the creations of community colleges, these institutions have played an important role in supporting and accommodating non-traditional students (Ely, 1997). Clark (2012) argued that students often share similar characteristics on challenges and fostering a sense of belonging. Studies suggested that community colleges should support all their diverse students by providing a social integration through active learning approaches (Ely, 1997; Clark, 2012). In addition, Beaver (2022) stated that community colleges also serve to provide the underprivileged students with the opportunity to obtain an Associate's degree and/or learn trade skills that enable them to provide for their families. Moreover, the mission of these institutions is to provide an education to the members of their community and facilitate the transition to 4 year-institutions.

We, at the Spanish Department, are committed to supporting all our students by providing an enhanced learning experience in and outside the classrooms. Throughout years of experience, we have learned that the most effective and successful events are the ones in which we collaborate in conjunctions with other disciplines and/or offices within our institution. These activities include cultural events for all the students interested in learning about the Hispanic culture; for instance, we celebrate the Day of the Dead, Hispanic Heritage Month, Escaramuzas (Skirmish) presentations, and Las Posadas. We have learned that all these activities keep our students engaged outside our classes and students develop a sense of belonging. In addition, we also provide field trips to local universities and conferences that facilitate a smooth transition to a 4-year university. As research has indicated, the sense of belonging is crucial for community college students to stay connected and achieve academic success (Hotchkins et al., 2022). We believe that our initiatives not only ensure our students' academic success, but also, we are providing opportunities for them to create a network for their professional development beyond their college experience.

Figure 1: First Generation Fest at Southern Methodist University



Figure 2: SCOLA Student Conference at Texas A&M University



Figure 3: Escaramuza presentation during the Hispanic Heritage Month

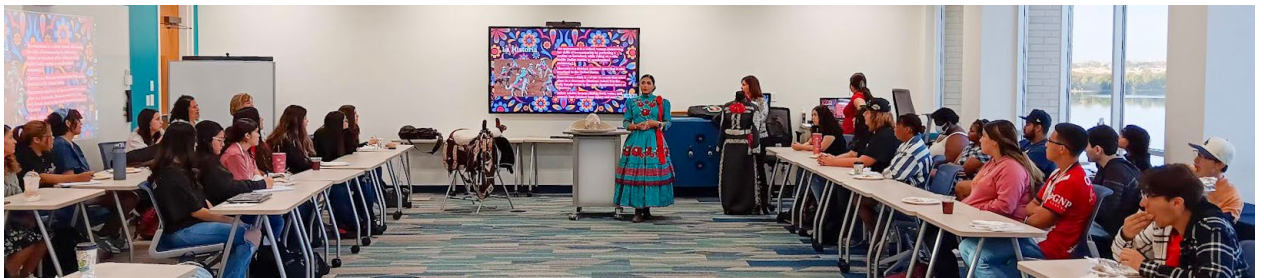


Figure 4: NW Day of the Dead Fest



Figures 5 and 6: Catrin/Catrina contest



Figure 7: NW students visiting universities



Figures 8 and 9: Matachines (traditional religious dancers) and audience at the Hispanic Celebration of Achievements



1.2. Texas Senate Bill 17 and Research Question

Texas Senate Bill 17 (SB 17) was implemented in the state of Texas to ensure institutional neutrality practices in all the higher education institutions (Jones et al., 2024). Jones et al. (2024) argued that as result of the implementation of this new bill, aspiring educators, whose student populations are underrepresented, continue to adapt with the new guidelines to sustain student-centered activities. Within the scope of SB 17 constraints, our Spanish department is exploring innovative approaches that continue fostering students' success and engagement by continuing supporting our non-traditional students. While SB 17 aims to redefine how equity-focused activities are implemented, important questions arise on how to support non-traditional students. Our research question is: What institutionally aligned strategies effectively support retention and completion among non-traditional foreign language students at the community college level within the framework of current legislative guidelines?

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory

In this study, we will examine how cultural activities, university field trips, and attending student conferences can be linked to greater social capital. Social capital theory is an important theoretical framework in the field of higher education institutions in the United States (Gentry, Martin, & Douglas, 2025). Gentry et al. (2025) claimed that this theory is rooted in the work of two sociologists Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), "social capital can be used to explain differences in outcomes based on access to and use of resources found

in one's network or relationships" (p. 2). In addition, Gentry et al. (2025) stated that this theory examines the resources obtained through the relationships and it has been used to investigate the students' access to higher education and students' academic success. According to Zerquera et al. (2016), faculty-student relationships play a vital role in students' retention and academic achievement.

Studies have demonstrated that researchers can use qualitative research methodologies by conducting interviews and case studies to investigate aspects such as the student groups where students interact (Dudwick et al., 2006 & Kilders, 2017). According to Kilders (2017), qualitative research can reveal insights into the quality of social capital, including the involvement in multiple groups while students are attending college and the benefits of interacting with different ethnicity groups. The relationships developed by the faculty members and students are important because they create positive benefits for all the students.

1.4. Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand the strategies that best support the non-traditional students at a community college level with the aim of increasing student retention, completion and transferability to 4-year institutions. Furthermore, our department complies with SB 17, which restricts equity and inclusion and diversity practices at the State of Texas, which we pay specific attention to align cultural practices and diverse populations of students with the legislative changes. This study will contribute to the new body of literature that explores how the higher education institutions adapt their practices to better accommodate and serve students that come from different backgrounds. Particularly, in our discipline, the majority of our students are Hispanic; also, others are dual credit, veteran and first-generation students. In our field of Spanish and foreign language courses, our students face challenges when navigating through the college experience, such as, family obligations, times constraints, financial burdens, limited campus engagement, cultural relevance, and real-world applications. The objectives of this study will identify the cultural, academic, and institutional practices that our non-traditional students face while attending our courses. In addition, this study will assess the strategies that align from the requirements of SB 17.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study will use a qualitative research design to explore the strategies that most effectively support non-traditional foreign language (FL) students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), considering the emerging challenges posed by Texas Senate Bill 17 (SB17). Because we are interested in learning about the lived experiences that the participants, our students, are going through a phenomenological approach will be utilized. This approach will help capture these lived experiences as well as the academic needs when navigating higher education in the developing legislative environment of SB 17, as well as capturing the cultural perceptions of the participants.

2.2. Participants

The pool of participants will consist of non-traditional students enrolled in Spanish courses at a community college in North Texas described above. The sample of participants will be goal-directed, concentrating on students who have participated in cultural and/or academic engagement activities presented by us, the Spanish faculty at that campus. In order to comply with ethical data collection, these students will voluntarily participate by completing

anonymous surveys. To provide instant and convenient feedback, students will be asked to complete surveys using easily available scannable QR codes after attending each event. Additionally, face-to-face interviews will be conducted to gain deeper insight. The interview questions and the surveys will be conducted with the purpose to gain in-depth information on the perceived value, impact, and general experience of these engaging activities.

2.3. Data Collection

Although some preliminary data was gathered through surveys with open-ended questions, the formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is currently in progress. The informal surveys were designed to capture students' feelings on their participation in cultural events, insights of institutional support, and how these experiences affected the students' sense of belonging to the institution, as well as their academic motivation, and persistence. Examples of events where students provided their experience include university trips, Hispanic Celebration of Achievement, Posadas and Dia de Muertos. Furthermore, observations during student events provided additional qualitative data. The survey instrument, provided in the appendix, was developed by us, the Spanish faculty at that campus, and submitted for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, which is in progress at the time of this proposal.

2.4. Instrumentation

A qualitative instrument was developed by the research team to explore the experiences, challenges, and needs of non-traditional students enrolled in foreign language programs at the community college level. The open-ended survey was designed to prompt in-depth responses aligned with the research question from this study. Although initial surveys have been conducted with students, the following instrument is proposed for the formal collection of research data. The instrument includes five core questions, each targeting a key area of interest informed by both the literature and the study's theoretical framework (Social Capital Theory). These questions seek to capture student perspectives on four key elements: institutional support, retention barriers, completion influences, and the impact of recent legislative changes on the students' educational journey.

Participants will be asked to reflect on the following prompts:

Support Strategies: What types of support services (e.g., tutoring, flexible scheduling, mentorship) do you believe are most effective in helping non-traditional students succeed in foreign language programs? **Retention Factors:** What challenges have you faced in continuing your foreign language studies, and what institutional strategies would help you overcome these challenges?

Completion Influences: What factors have most influenced your ability to complete foreign language coursework, and how could the college better support these needs?

Legislative Impact (SB17): In what ways, if any, do you feel that SB17 has affected your progress in foreign language studies?

Institutional Recommendations: What specific actions should community colleges take to improve retention and completion rates for non-traditional foreign language students, especially considering the challenges posed by SB17?

3. Literature

The literature review explores essential topics related to student retention, engagement, and institutional support to exemplify the experiences of non-traditional students in foreign language programs at community colleges, particularly within the framework of a Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI). The overall literature for this research consistently showed that non-traditional students often balance work, family, and education. These students faced unique barriers to persistence and degree completion (Kamer & Ishitani, 2021). These challenges are now intensified by recent legislative developments, such as Texas Senate Bill 17 (SB17), which restrict diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at public institutions and may impact students' sense of belonging (Green, 2024). This review is guided by Social Capital Theory and highlights how relational networks, and institutional connections serve as factors in supporting student success, especially for first-generation and Hispanic students. The following literature provides a basis for understanding how support strategies, cultural recognition, and community engagement can decrease barriers and increase retention among non-traditional students in language programs. Kamer and Ishitani (2021) conducted a longitudinal study exploring how risk factors of attrition vary over time for first-year, non-traditional students enrolled at four-year institutions. Their research underlined the importance of recognizing that non-traditional students often enroll part-time, delay entry into college, and balance significant work and family responsibilities. On top of this, these students also experienced visible barriers to persistence and completion. The study found that institutional support must be active and progress as the needs from students change during their academic journey. The insights from Kamer and Ishitani support the need for adaptable, student-centered approaches, including flexible scheduling, consistent mentorship, and inclusive programming. Moreover, their work reinforces the urgency of responsive institutional practices, particularly in the challenge of legislative developments such as Senate Bill 17, which may reduce access to culturally relevant resources and diminish students' sense of belonging. Their findings provide a valuable foundation for framing targeted strategies that promote the academic success of non-traditional foreign language learners.

Similarly, Green (2024) offered a thorough legal and educational analysis of Texas Senate Bill 17 (SB17), a policy that restricts diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at public colleges and universities. Green highlighted the historical context and political motivations behind the bill and examines its implications for marginalized student populations, particularly those at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Green argued that SB17 not only undermines institutional efforts to foster inclusive learning environments but also intensifies existing inequities by eliminating programs, offices, and pedagogical approaches that affirm the cultural identities and lived experiences of underrepresented students. For non-traditional students in foreign language programs, many of whom are first-generation, working adults, and from historically marginalized communities, this legislation presents additional challenges to engagement, retention, and completion. Green provided context for understanding how SB17 may diminish students' sense of belonging and limit access to experiences that cultivate cultural sense of belonging. Green's insights support the urgent need for alternatives, creative strategies to maintain student engagement and uphold the mission of equity and access, even under restrictive legislative conditions.

By the same token, the University of Texas at Austin developed a webpage to provide light on SB 17 and how it is affecting their institution. The University of Texas at Austin's SB17 Compliance page (n.d.) outlines the response from the institution to the recent Texas Senate Bill 17, which took effect on January 1, 2024. The webpage provides detailed guidance on how public institutions must reorganize or eliminate activities that fall under the law's prohibitions regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices. Some of the

significant instructions for UT-Austin include the removal of DEI offices, the elimination of mandatory DEI training, and restrictions on considering race, sex, or ethnicity in hiring and admissions processes. The compliance overview emphasizes the administrative measures taken to align with state law, including the formation of review committees and the revision of institutional policies, programming, and communications. Many of these instructions are now implemented in different higher education institutions throughout the state. UT Austin's website serves as a guide for community colleges that serve large populations of first-generation and Hispanic students, these compliance guidelines present a framework for understanding how SB17 could influence institutional culture, programming decisions, and student engagement. The UT Austin compliance page is as an example of how public institutions are implementing SB17, offering understanding of the implications for foreign language programs and student support services, it also reinforces the importance of finding strategies that maintain a sense of belonging and cultural recognition for non-traditional students during the implementation of SB 17.

In their article, *"Fanning the FLAMEs: Balancing Advocacy and Compliance in an Anti-DEI Era"*, Wright-Davis, Francis and Myers (2024) explored how SB17 has affected the student retention and completion records at their higher education institution. The authors mentioned that SB17 has caused the removal of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion efforts at their campus and that this has led to a feeling of fear and a decrease of sense of belonging to their institution among students and staff. Participants reported that SB 17 held back open communication on topics such as diversity, discrimination, and gender, which in the end created barriers to persistence and retention. The authors presented the student organization Fiercely Leading as Multicultural Educators, FLAME, as a safe space where these students could create a sense of belonging and feel welcomed and appreciated for their culture and ethnic heritage. The authors mentioned that the key to keeping this organization alive despite SB 17 was the fact that it does not receive university funds.

Correspondingly, in *"Reimagining Equity: Embodying Mentorship to Empower Historically Underserved Educators"* Jones, Johnson, and Middleton (2024) also concurred in their study that SB 17 has negatively impacted the student retention and completion rates at their institution, more specifically for Brown and Black students wanting to become educators. Their study highlighted the lack of representation and role models for these minority students since the passing of SB 17. The authors recommended the implementation of strategies such as community engagement initiatives to promote racial pride and affirm cultural identities. These recommendations align perfectly with the initiatives presented by us in this study, such as the university trips; our goal is to create a network of support for our students and their transfer institutions, and at the same time to present ourselves and our connections at the other institutions, as faculty of color and role models to our students.

Lastly, the article *Cultivating a Collectivist Community on a College Campus for Latinx Students* (Arellanes et al., 2024) stated that their Latinx students had a positive impact on their academic success because of key strategies they implemented for their students. These key strategies included inclusion, diversity, equity and access (IDEA) initiatives. The authors mentioned that these initiatives cultivated a greater sense of belonging, built resilience, and students were able to access resources that supported their academic and personal growth, leading to higher levels of success among their Latinx students. Cultural affirmation was mentioned throughout the article as a key component to making students feel seen and valued; collaborative learning opportunities were also mentioned as a key component where students could learn not only from one another but also gain social capital by utilizing campus resources. The authors reinforced the need for IDEA initiatives to better support Latinx students and help them thrive at their higher education institutions.

More research is needed now that SB 17 has been implemented in higher education institutions in Texas. According to the above authors, Arellanes, J. A., Hendricks, M., & Su-Russell, C. (2024), more data is needed to shed light on how this legislation has affected programs such as IDEA, and similar, and how the academic success and retention of Latinx students is being altered.

4. Data Analysis

This study articulates a compelling need for in-depth research focused on the efficacy of the Spanish department's student empowerment initiatives at a higher education institution. Hotchkins et al. (2022) and Kamer and Ishitani (2021) have spelled out the necessity of initiative-taking and multi-dimensional activities, such as the one our Spanish department initiated. Therefore, strategic incorporation of guest speakers, the hosting of enriching cultural events and presentations, and providing invaluable visits to local four-year colleges. Thus, this research proposal seeks to investigate solely the tangible impact these activities have on our foreign language non-traditional student enrollment.

Social Capital theory offers a valuable framework for examining how the Spanish department's student empowerment initiatives might influence non-traditional learners. At its core, this theory argues that social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness arising from them can provide individuals with access to valuable resources and support. Such resources may take the form of information, assistance, and a feeling of belonging, which can influence academic engagement and performance. By examining the connections developed through the practices of the Spanish department, this research aims to examine how these experiences contribute to the development of students' social capital and subsequently, their academic trajectories.

Preliminary observations and anecdotal evidence from early 2000's strongly have suggested that the interactions and engagement opportunities college students experience play a crucial role in fostering valuable social and academic connections, a phenomenon well-explained by the principles of social capital theory. By actively cultivating these vital links and supportive networks, students appear demonstrably better equipped with the necessary resources and confidence to successfully navigate their future academic pathways and achieve a seamless transition to four-year colleges and universities as observed in other literature (Ryan, 2017; Segura et al., 2001).

This proposed study aims to employ robust methodologies to systematically examine the correlation between these specific departmental initiatives and key student success metrics, including course completion rates, program retention figures, and successful transfer outcomes. The anticipated empirical evidence is important because it will validate the effectiveness of these strategies within the Spanish department. Additionally, it will also provide a data-driven foundation for potentially expanding and adapting these impactful models across other language departments and academic disciplines within the broader institution, ultimately enhancing the overall student experience and success rates for our diverse learner population.

4.1. Restatement of Objectives

Three primary objectives will guide our research: first, to explore the potential impact of inter-departmental, inter-office, and outside partnerships (e.g., four-year universities) on student success. Second, learn how collaborative efforts can enhance student participation and continuous enrollment in foreign language classes. Finally, this study aims to investigate and analyze some of the initiatives of the Spanish department. To address these objectives,

this proposed study aims to provide thoughtful information on effective models for serving this student group and supporting their successful academic pathways within and beyond our community college.

4.2. Description of Previous Anecdotal Evidence

To provide a more in-depth analysis from previous departmental initiatives, we collected data from previous Spanish department's events. For instance, following a series of cultural and guest speakers, we observed an increment of students inquiring about majoring or minoring in Spanish upon transferring to four-year universities. Hence the importance of this study, non-traditional students who have participated in past field trips are now successfully transferring to earn bachelor's degrees. One student, who is a single mother, indicated that the visit to the university demystified the four-year college environment and encouraged her to consider applying to the university. Furthermore, anecdotal student comments at cultural events consistently reported students' gaining social capital through a heightened sense of belonging and community among non-traditional students. These were often cited as a major reason for their continued participation in the Spanish department's events. While not part of a formal study, these anecdotes reflect the actual positive effect of our department's initiatives on student involvement and academic progress. Our aim will be to gain rich and informative responses directly from the student participants who attend Spanish department's events.

4.3. Presentation of Previous Informal Data

We have collected informal data through scannable QR codes on previous college events. The analysis of our informal data revealed the impact of the Spanish department's initiatives on non-traditional foreign language students through recurring themes. Student feedback from cultural events highlighted the significance of these initiatives in reinforcing their heritage and personal identity. For instance, one student shared, "I learned that this is a very traditional event in our Mexican community," while another student noted learning about "the Mexican culture and more about my roots." This desire to "learn more about las posadas and history of the piñatas and about my culture," underscores the value students place on these cultural immersion opportunities.

Furthermore, previous informal data gathered during events like the "Celebration of Achievements" captured the significant impact of celebrating personal accomplishment in an encouraging community. The participants indicated the significance of the event in honoring individual accomplishments and the ongoing support given by their families. The recognition of being the first in their families to graduate, a recurring theme, captures the sentiment of the occasion in generating satisfying and affirming experience for students as well as their families. In addition, students' comments have consistently emphasized building up a keen sense of belonging, particularly on the part of first-generation students, who often experience unique difficulties in pursuing higher education.

Participants have also commended the cultural acceptability of these efforts, expressed gratitude, and hoped for similar acceptance among other minority individuals, thus fostering a culture of acceptability and recognition. However, the data also revealed potential participation barriers for non-traditional students. As one student said, "I typically work full time and my only days off are Monday and Wednesday the other days I work 8-5 and I have to either miss work or class to attend an event," showing the scheduling conflicts that may hinder involvement for working learners. This underlines the necessity of considering the diverse life circumstances of non-traditional students when designing and implementing departmental programs for ensuring equal access and achieving maximum participation. The collective qualitative data revealed that although cultural enrichment and shared celebration

are highly valued, logistical matters remain critical to ensuring inclusive participation. These anecdotal accounts aligned substantively with our theoretical framework of social capital theory.

5. Conclusion

Existing literature gives vital context in framing its potential significance. Studies of retention among non-traditional students in four-year institutions, such as Kamer's (2021), highlighted the dynamic nature of attrition markers and progressive modification throughout a student's first year. Hence that interventions from non-traditional foreign language learners must also have to be flexible and responsive to their changing needs. Furthermore, parent social capital and college-alignment action studies, as studied by Ryan (2017), revealed the important influence exerted by family support and familiarity with the higher education system on the college trajectory of students. This is particularly true in our own research, as a substantial percentage of non-traditional students may have less immediately engaged backgrounds to help navigate the complexities of higher education, and departmental support and guidance are thus more critical to bridge social capital disparities. Additionally, Segura's work on Hispanics, social capital, and civic participation highlighted the emphasis that is placed on within-group and between-group relationships as means for the development of participation and incorporation.

Our study design, through its examination of the impact of departmental activities like cultural activities, cultural celebrations, and university tours, directly addresses the potential of creating bonding as well as bridging social capital among foreign language students who are non-traditional. The cultural activities can have the potential to cement in-group relationships and feelings of belonging, while the university tours can have the potential to generate very important bridging capital through experience of new learning environments and potential future networks. Halm's (2015) study on the student learning outcomes after engagement also supported the necessity of active engagement as well as that of creating supportive learning environments for positive outcomes. Our study, by researching the individual effects of various strategies of engagement towards completion and retention, is quite literally in accordance with Halm's study, claiming that intervention by departments does indeed have the ability to make a better learning environment for non-traditional students.

The implications of our proposed study are numerous and far-reaching. Foremost, conducting this study will provide important empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of current resources and efforts made by our institution's Spanish department to serve non-traditional foreign language learners. It is important to be aware whether guest lecturers, cultural performances, and field trips sponsored by the university have made measurable efforts on higher completion and retention rates to allow for sound decision-making and efficient expenditure of departmental resources. Positive findings will justify existing practices and provide a data basis for ongoing utilization and further development.

On the other hand, if the data show areas where these initiatives are falling short of their full potential, it would necessitate a critical examination, opening the way for the creation of more focused and effective support mechanisms. Additionally, the completion and publication of this research can significantly contribute to our institution's ability to attract funding for future initiatives directed towards non-traditional students, as funders increasingly require demonstrable effectiveness and results-driven approaches. Evidence from a study demonstrating the positive impacts of our departmental programs would make our competitive strength more likely to be successful in securing extramural funding to

further expand these successful models to other departments and student populations throughout the institution. This could lead to a long-term institutional commitment to empowering non-traditional learners across the disciplines.

Finally, this study can contribute and enhance teaching practices in our foreign language courses. Through recognizing the specific manner in which engagement activities contribute to student achievement, instructors can apply these concepts in their course development and classroom teaching. For instance, if student feedback reveals the value of particular types of cultural presentations in developing motivation or a sense of belonging to the language and culture, instructors can incorporate more of these into their courses. Similarly, information on the impact of university visits on students' post-secondary education aspirations can be applied to inform advising and the development of specialty transfer support services. Lastly, this research can guide a more student-centered and responsive foreign language teaching method, one that is especially responsive to the unique needs and abilities of non-traditional students in a community college.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Student survey:

Thank you for participating in (Name of Event)!

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey.

1. What types of support services (e.g., tutoring, flexible scheduling, mentorship) do you believe are most effective in helping you succeed in our Spanish class?
2. What challenges have you faced in continuing your Spanish studies, and what institutional strategies would help you overcome these challenges?
3. What factors have most influenced your ability to complete Spanish coursework, and how could the college better support these needs?
4. In what ways, if any, do you feel that SB17 has affected your progress in Spanish studies?
5. What specific actions should our institution take to improve retention and completion rates for non-traditional Spanish students, especially considering the challenges posed by SB17?