

Impact of Smaller Class Sizes in U-M Spanish and German Courses

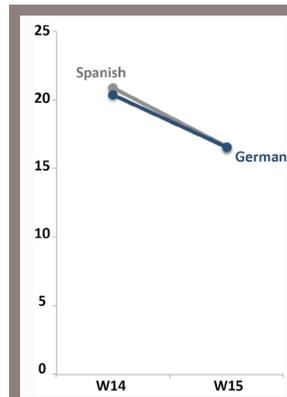
Executive Summary

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In Winter 2015, two University of Michigan language departments participated in a pilot initiative to decrease class size in 100- and 200-level sections. Throughout introductory Spanish and German courses, the policy decreased caps from a maximum of 25 to an upper limit of 18 students. In practice, from Winter 2014 to Winter 2015, sections decreased from a mean of 21 to 17 students per class in Spanish and an average of 20 to 17 in German. To investigate the change, CRLT collected data from instructor and coordinator focus groups, student focus groups, instructor written plans for teaching at two points in the term, student ratings, student participation and written exam grades, and student survey data about the perceived impact of the current section size on their learning.

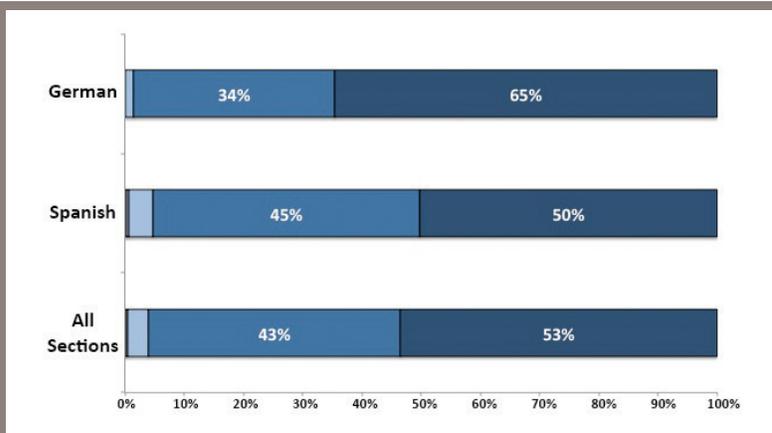


Section Sizes Decreased by Approx. 4 Students

Key findings about the outcomes and impact of this change include:

1. Reported changes in teaching: Focus group feedback from both instructors and students suggest that faculty were able to leverage the smaller class size to make significant changes to their teaching. Both instructors and students pointed to four key changes in teaching and learning that they attributed to smaller sections: improved classroom climate, increased participation, greater oral and written feedback, and enhanced classroom management (e.g., time-on-task). While not named by students, faculty also described four additional changes: more personalization, greater opportunities for course development, enhanced preparation among students, and changes in outside-of-class interaction (e.g., in-person or online office hours).
2. Student satisfaction: In a survey of all students in the courses of interest (58% response rate), nearly all (95%) agreed that the number of students in their section worked well for their learning. In comments, most (86%) suggested a positive effect of the current size, with the most frequently given reason being that the small class allowed for more interaction with the instructor and a more personalized educational experience. A minority of students reported no effect (12%) or a negative impact (2%), with students in the latter category indicating difficulty registering for a class or too few students to participate in a robust discussion.

“ This is the first time that I really feel like I know every one of my students. I know what are their strengths, what are their weaknesses. I know where can I push them, where I should back off. ”
-Spanish instructor



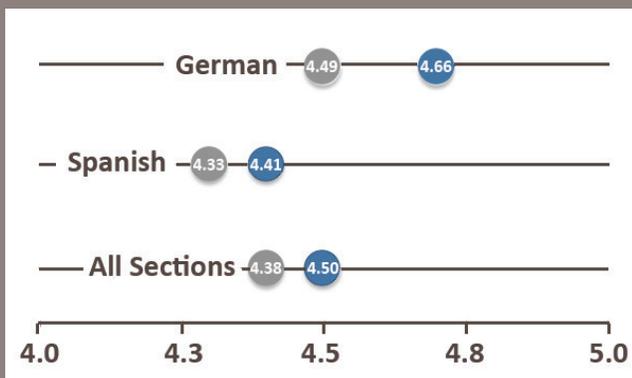
Nearly All Students Agreed Small Classes Worked Well for Their Learning

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

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page 2



Note: Presents Q3 ("I learned a great deal from this course") means for sections with a Q4 score ("I had a strong motivation to take this course") of 3.0 or higher.

Students' Q3 Scores Increased from W14-W15*

In analyses of student satisfaction with their course (Q1) or instructor (Q2), there were limited statistically significant differences between years, but overall, satisfaction did stay consistently at a high level (4.2 for Q1 and 4.5 for Q2, in both years). Comparing Winter 2014 and 2015, German courses did show significantly higher Q1 ratings with smaller course sizes.

3. Student learning: Despite changes to teaching and learning, instructors predicted limited changes to short-term measures of student performance – and their predictions held true. There was no statistically significant difference in Spanish oral participation grades, nor in Spanish or German written exam grades. The lack of statistical significance in the German gain may be due to small sample sizes. An effect size calculation signals moderate practical significance, Cohen's $d=0.5$. Possibly, longer-term direct measures also of student learning may be necessary to capture this impact. However, perceived learning gains (Q3), controlling for factors such as prior student motivation to take the course. (The above figure is a simplified representation of the regression findings.)
4. Challenges: In focus group discussions, students and instructors were clear that the benefits of smaller class sizes outweighed any drawbacks. However, they indicated that it would be helpful for future instructors to know about several unanticipated challenges: further decreases in enrollment (e.g., absences), under- and over-participation because students' participatory tendencies seemed magnified in smaller settings, and a blurring of boundaries or an overly permissive atmosphere because of the heightened sense of community. Coordinators also described acute administrative challenges with hiring and mentoring many new employees. Finally, while both Spanish and German instructors indicated in their initial plans that they intended to develop new pedagogical strategies or initiatives, German instructors reported that they were able to do this less successfully due to a highly structured curriculum.
5. Recommendations: Spanish instructors enthusiastically recommended continuation of 18-student section caps, indicating that smaller sizes facilitate achievement of a key learning objective for language courses: communication. German instructors recommended a range of 18-20 students per section, also with the rationale that students learn better in this context. Most students also advised staying at 18, because it allows for interactions and practice needed to master language learning. For future implementation, initial instructor meetings to promote intentionality and continued support (e.g., CRLT workshop on inclusive teaching) are also recommended to best help faculty leverage small class sizes.

“ I enjoy smaller classes. It allows each person to form a connection with the teacher and create a bond, which I think facilitates a better learning environment because you're just not another face in a crowd. ”

-W15 student in a smaller section