




## Reach out, research, and reform: Advocating for the future of world language education

Kimberly Morris, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse 

### Abstract

*The landscape of world language education (WLE) in the U.S. has shifted significantly in recent years due to a variety of issues including language enrollment declines, teacher shortages, program cuts, and polarizing ideologies, among others (ACTFL, 2025a; Lusin et al., 2023; Tang, 2023; Thompson, 2024). To maintain the vitality of WLE programs, practitioners have been required to reconceptualize their curricula and recruitment pathways to adapt to this “new normal,” inevitably increasing their workload and emotion labor. This report outlines how a small WLE program at a mid-sized comprehensive university in Wisconsin confronted their local challenges by adopting a three-pronged advocacy approach involving outreach, research, and curricular reform. By expanding outreach efforts, conducting local research, and applying the findings to perform curricular redesign, this approach seeks to expand pathways into an ever-evolving program that is centered on career-readiness. The implications of such advocacy work can serve to mitigate the aforementioned challenges, creating a positive ripple effect throughout the field.*

**Keywords:** World Language Education, Advocacy, Emotion Labor

**APA Citation:** Morris, K. (2026). Reach out, research, and reform: Advocating for the future of world language education. *Second Language Research & Practice*, 6(1), 38–49.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10125/69902>

### Introduction

Despite the recent surge of innovative empirical research and practice related to world language (WL) teaching and learning, it is currently a difficult time to be a WL teacher and teacher educator. A variety of issues including declining student enrollment (Lusin et al., 2023), program reductions and cuts (Tang, 2019; Thompson, 2024), and harmful ideologies about language education (Rosa & Flores, 2023) have all but stifled the energy out of WL teachers and scholars both at the K-12 level and in higher education. A contentious political environment and changes in government structure have added further complexity, including the dismantling of the Department of Education and the declaration of English as the official language in the U.S. (see position statements in ACTFL, 2025a; ACTFL, 2025b; and ACTFL, 2025c). In fact, on January 28, 2025, ACTFL issued a “Statement of Support to World Language Educators” in response to recent Executive Orders issued by the Trump administration. A portion of the statement affirms:

Language learning strengthens skills that are invaluable in any society: critical thinking, problem-solving, cross-cultural connections, and adaptability—among many others. These are the very qualities needed to address the global challenges of today and tomorrow. As the world becomes more interdependent, the demand for multilingual and culturally competent individuals will only grow. Your efforts as educators are essential in supporting the clear impact that language learning has in the achievement of all learners. (ACTFL, 2025a)

This “new normal,” though unsettling, has required language programs and directors to swiftly reconsider

their course offerings, recruitment approach, and overall program design in an effort to stay relevant during uncertain times (Tang, 2019). The theme of this volume, “*New normal, new urgency: Invisible and emotion labor in language program advocacy*,” strongly resonates with me, as the World Language Education (WLE) program I currently direct at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) is struggling to stay afloat in rough waters. I was thrilled to contribute to the SLRP panel at the 2025 MLA Convention (Morris, 2025b), where my fellow panelists and organizer discussed several pressing issues that contribute to invisible and emotion labor from different perspectives, emphasizing the necessary advocacy work that lies ahead. For instance, Goetze (2025) investigated the health and well-being of language program administrators, while Ferry (2025) adopted a *systems thinking* approach to visualize and confront existing issues of workload in her language department.

In this report, I share my experiences, challenges, and insights from the perspective of a small WLE program offered at UWL, a public comprehensive university with approximately 10,500 students. The WLE program prepares undergraduate students for teacher certification in K-12 Spanish or French in the state of Wisconsin. After providing a brief context about the pressing issues of WL teacher shortage and attrition, I describe the challenges I have experienced at my institution since 2017 (my start date) and how they have impacted the WLE program, highlighting the invisible and emotion labor that has accompanied the process. Next, I outline a three-pronged advocacy approach to address these challenges by conducting outreach, research, and curricular reform. Finally, I conclude by highlighting important implications to maintain the future vitality of WLE in our inevitable new normal.

## **Broad Context: World Language Teacher Shortage and Attrition**

Although challenges in language teaching have seemed to multiply exponentially in recent years, the field has been plagued for decades by a widespread teacher shortage in many parts of the world (Swanson & Mason, 2018). In fact, a recent report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017) found that in the U.S., 44 states and Washington D.C. reported not having enough qualified WL teachers to meet their needs. Such teacher shortages have led to program cuts and reductions (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017), which I have witnessed in my own community. Further exacerbating the problem are record drops in enrollment in language classes. According to the most recent MLA report (Lusin et al., 2023), enrollment in language classes at U.S. universities dropped approximately 17% between 2016-2021, and since 2009, the total decline has been nearly 30%. Considering these circumstances, it is no wonder why many WL teachers have decided to leave the field altogether. For instance, in a study conducted in the state of Georgia, the attrition rates of WL teachers were found to be the highest among all high school subject areas, with approximately 45% of teachers leaving within five years (Stephens et al., 2015).

In my local state of Wisconsin, the teacher shortage for WLE is documented as critical between 2000-2022 (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). However, a search for vacancies in K-12 Spanish, French, or German teachers on the Wisconsin Education Career Access Network (WECAN) in January 2025 revealed 50 positions available across the state, a large number for that time of year. This data aligns with trends reported by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (Kammerud et al., 2024), which found that only 67% of Wisconsin school districts were able to meet their WL hiring needs between 2020-2022. What is more, the field of world languages is one of the three disciplines with the lowest quality applicant pool, meaning that districts needed to employ alternative strategies such as hiring substitutes, teachers without the preferred requirements, or those on a temporary Tier I (emergency) license that allows them to teach as they fulfill the requirements for a standard license. Unfortunately, in a middle school located 15 miles from my institution, the French program was recently eliminated altogether because the district had no applicants for the open position. Furthermore, there are fewer incentives to become a teacher in Wisconsin, as recent data confirms that the median salary has decreased 19% since 2010 (Kammerud et al., 2024). For those who choose to become teachers, only 60% stay in the profession for longer than six years (Machtig, 2024). Although Wisconsin state statutes require schools to offer WL courses in grades 7-12, there is no WL requirement for high school graduation (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.) Though bleak,

these findings serve as reminders of the crucial advocacy work that needs to be done to maintain the vitality of WLE in Wisconsin, which represents a microcosm of a larger problem nationwide. In the following section, I describe my local context and how the issues I have faced are ultimately connected to and inform the larger WLE community.

### **Institutional Context: World Language Education at UWL**

Facing the aforementioned trends has created a new normal for WLE at UWL that involves much more urgency and uncertainty, inevitably resulting in an increase in both anxiety and workload. It is worth noting that the WLE program has been in flux since my hiring in 2017 and was completely redesigned in 2019 to meet the evolving needs and realities of the students, faculty, and local K-12 schools that partner with UWL to host our pre-service teachers for their required clinical experiences in field placements. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the courses have been in a near constant state of redesign, as the realities of language education in general continue to evolve. In its current iteration, the WLE program core consists of six courses, including a course on second language acquisition, another on intercultural interactions, two methods courses, and two field seminars that accompany students' field placements at local K-12 schools. Students must also complete a traditional major in their target language (Spanish or French) to gain linguistic and cultural competencies. In addition, teacher candidates are required to participate in a 14-week study abroad experience, place at the intermediate-high level (or higher) on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview and Written Proficiency Test, student teach for one semester, and complete the summative edTPA assessment with a passing score according to the standards set by our School of Education. Due to the rigor of the program coupled with the market demand, 100% of graduates attain employment in related positions after graduation.

However, the vitality of WLE at UWL is threatened by a number of interrelated factors. According to recent data from the Office of Institutional Research at UWL, enrollment numbers in WLE programs have declined significantly from 36 majors in 2017 to just 14 in 2024. This data mirrors troublesome trends in the larger UWL community. For instance, there has been a dramatic drop in enrollment in all languages at UWL. In Spanish alone, there were 132 majors and 339 minors in 2018 yet only 58 majors and 231 minors in 2024. To exacerbate the problem, the entire German program was cut and a tenure line in Spanish was not renewed following two language faculty resignations in fall 2024. These cuts reflect trends occurring in higher education nationwide such as at West Virginia University, Miami University, and the University of Maine, Farmington, where language programs (among others largely in the arts and humanities) have been consolidated, reduced, or cut due to budget deficits (Hanlon, 2023). Similar trends have been visible in our local K-12 school district, where French was recently eliminated at the middle and high school levels, and an elementary partial Spanish immersion program was cut during the pandemic. The invisible emotion labor required to process and confront these mounting issues has undoubtedly increased my anxiety and fear that the WLE program may be next on the chopping block.

### **Primary Challenges of World Language Education at UWL**

The WLE program at UWL has faced several challenges that have likely contributed to the aforementioned drop in enrollment in recent years. The first challenge relates to the evolving changes and limitations in language program offerings and staffing at local elementary, middle, and high schools. Because WLE students are required to participate in three semesters of clinical experience in K-12 classrooms (two semesters of field experience and one semester of student teaching), there is a critical need for consistent local partners to host our teacher candidates and serve as cooperating teachers. In theory, the partnership is mutually beneficial, as expert in-service teachers serve as mentors to pre-service teachers, who contribute fresh ideas and energy as they gain experience in the classroom. However, the last eight years have been plagued with issues that have severely changed the landscape of sustainable field placements for our students, including budget cuts, COVID-19, and enrollment fluctuations, among others. As a result, the German Education program at UWL was suspended in 2017-18 due to untenable local placements. (Now that the German program was recently cut, German Education has been eliminated altogether.) Likewise,

the number of cooperating teachers who agree to host our students has lowered dramatically since the onset of COVID-19 because many of their programs have been reduced, their administration does not allow them to host students due to burnout, and some have left the field altogether. For this reason, our School of Education has limited admission to the WLE program to a small number of students, yet such low enrollment only exacerbates the teacher shortage in this critical area. This situation represents the vicious cycle playing out on a larger structural level: K-12 schools need more teachers, yet higher education cannot produce more teachers without the adequate conditions required for their training – in this case, sufficient field placements.

Furthermore, the WLE program has experienced inconsistent cohort sizes (between 1-8 students) due to unstable enrollment following the pandemic. Additionally, the WLE program has struggled to attract heritage speakers of Spanish. This is particularly noteworthy given that heritage speakers of Spanish are a large part of local rural populations, and other teacher preparation programs at UWL train heritage users of Spanish to teach other subjects. If enrollment continues to ebb and flow, there is a chance that certain tracks in WLE could be suspended or cut altogether, only further aggravating the teacher shortage. For example, there are only three students currently enrolled in the French Education program. As of January 2026, both the French Education and Spanish Education programs were given just one year to improve enrollment or face the potential of being suspended or eliminated by the college dean and provost.

Due to the unstable student enrollment, there have been several changes in faculty personnel in the WLE programs at UWL. Although three faculty members were hired to support WLE programs following retirements in 2016 and 2017, one left the university (and field) in 2022. Because of low enrollment in the program, that position has since been eliminated. Currently, there are two faculty members who are affiliated with WLE (including myself), although we split our duties between programs in Spanish (50%) and WLE (50%), equaling only one full-time position in WLE. Due to the small size of the WLE program, we typically teach three-to-four different course preps every semester between WLE and Spanish and conduct student observations, contributing a heavy burden to our workload. Due to our participation in two different divisions, we typically perform twice the service as traditional language faculty, who rarely understand the technicalities involved in K-12 teacher training. Although it would be ideal to recruit more students to justify the hiring of an additional faculty member in WLE, current field placements in local schools limit our ability to admit more students to the program, resulting in a catch-22 and contributing to the vicious cycle previously mentioned.

The emotions I feel upon writing these words and rereading them closely span the divide between defeat and hope. In the spirit of advocacy, I choose hope because I am convinced of the importance of language teaching not only to cultivate intercultural competence and career readiness, but also to foster a sense of belonging and empathy, skills which are critically needed in our increasingly divided society.

## **Advocating for World Language Education**

To maintain the vitality of WLE and address the challenges outlined above, I propose a three-pronged advocacy approach that consists of reaching out, conducting research, and performing curricular reform. While this approach was not planned in advance, the activities and reforms involved in each of the three areas were found to be interconnected and particularly beneficial when carried out in conjunction, informing the actions involved in the other areas. The rationale for focusing on these three components was not only to increase visibility of the WLE program through enhanced outreach efforts but also to investigate the program's strengths and areas for improvement and subsequently apply these findings to improve the curriculum for future students. In the next sections, I provide examples of strategies my colleagues and I have implemented in each area as well as ideas for program maintenance and growth in the future.

### **Reach Out**

Conducting regular outreach is a necessary piece of the language program direction puzzle yet often comes with little to no training, compensation, or recognition. What I have learned in my eight years of observing

and troubleshooting different outreach strategies is that active communication is the only way to make language programs, including WLE, externally visible through various methods including webpages, marketing videos, social media posts, flyers, program ambassadors, outreach events, and more. For example, I recently worked with UWL Marketing and Communications to create a website specifically dedicated to teacher certification in WLE to increase its visibility, as it had previously been mentioned as a career opportunity in a sidebar on the websites for the Spanish and French programs. Similarly, my colleagues and I have created bilingual bookmarks to advertise our language programs (including WLE), which have been shared across campus with advisors, faculty, students, parents, and at freshman orientation. We have also created presentation slides with specific information about each language program, which have been shared by both faculty and advisors during recruitment events. In recent years, we have increased our presence on campus by intentionally highlighting specific classes, events, and even language students in *Campus Connection*, the weekly newsletter sent to all UWL staff and students that highlights a handful of outstanding stories. I even had a professional banner made to call students' attention to the critical need for language teachers as they stroll by the language department office on campus.

Such communications do not delve into every detail of our programs but rather outline the importance of language learning and teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century along with the tangible benefits and applications it can offer. These efforts align with national attempts to advocate for language education, such as through organizations including ACTFL, the Language Connects Foundation, and the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL), all of which provide free advocacy resources (ACTFL, 2025d; Joint National Committee for Languages, 2020; Language Connects Foundation, 2025). The American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Language Programs (AAUSC) released additional advocacy strategies that can be implemented immediately via a "Checklist for Advocacy for Threatened Programs and Departments" (2019). Furthermore, we have found that communication across different constituents is most effective when it is **clear, concise, and consistent**. Although the messaging can be adjusted for the audience and purpose, we have found it helpful to share the same information with academic advisors, fellow colleagues, community members, parents, and students, whether prospective or enrolled. We have reshared and recirculated this information often to raise awareness and stimulate interest in language education.

In addition, we have found ways to integrate outreach into student **advising**, whether it is done through language faculty or general advisors. For example, we have hosted various advising fairs for both high school and UWL students to learn more about our programs, including WLE. We have also seen increased enrollment in WLE when faculty and student ambassadors (students who are currently in the WLE program) visit language and education courses with high freshman and sophomore enrollment and share their experiences becoming a language teacher. To facilitate advising, I have found it essential to listen actively to students, colleagues, and advisors to learn more about the general messaging they receive about language education. For instance, several of my students have reported being told by faculty members in other disciplines or general academic advisors that they should not bother enrolling in language courses. This information, though infuriating, shows me that there is a misunderstanding about language teaching and learning at my institution. Many faculty members and advisors of non-language majors are under the impression that there is no time to "squeeze in" language classes, especially when they are not required and often viewed as electives. However, when planned intentionally, students are indeed able to complete a language certificate, minor, or even double major successfully without additional time to degree, particularly when they have previous experience, place into a higher level of the language, and study abroad. Nevertheless, this is an opportunity to **call out** these misconceptions and **call in** those individuals to engage in an open conversation about the importance of language learning and teaching in our increasingly globalized society.

In the realm of WLE, it is crucial to conduct outreach with both K-12 educators and students to strengthen the network of cooperating teachers and the pipeline of prospective students. In this sense, Tang (2019) affirms, "Regular conversations with high school language teachers can help us anticipate what our future students will look like and what their needs will be; these conversations also offer mutual support in times

when one-person language programs, especially in smaller languages, are becoming more common in high schools and colleges alike.” During the spring 2025 semester, my colleague and I visited a high school class of Spanish for heritage speakers in a rural town an hour away from UWL to describe our program to students and highlight the critical need for language teachers. In the coming years, we plan to partner with this school to create a more direct pipeline of students into the WLE program. In addition to outreach with students, we have hosted several gatherings at UWL for local K-12 teachers to learn about our WLE program, share details about their programs, and strengthen collaborations across districts. Although the pandemic significantly changed the landscape of language teachers in our local schools and our ability to gather in person, I hope to offer additional events in the future with those teachers who remain and cast a wider net to include teachers from districts outside of the area. Active and consistent collaboration is crucial for the future of WLE, particularly since many language teachers work in small or isolated programs, which can limit their regular interactions with other professionals in the field, ultimately leading to increased burnout and attrition (Swanson & Huff, 2010).

Finally, I have found it beneficial to reach out to colleagues at other institutions in my state to learn more about the realities of their programs and share victories and challenges. In fact, the day I returned from the 2025 MLA Convention where I presented about advocacy, I received an email from my dean’s office requesting a meeting to discuss the low enrollment in the WLE program I direct. My heart sunk, and I immediately went into data collection mode so that I could justify our challenges and highlight ideas for moving forward. Part of this data collection included setting up (virtual) meetings with colleagues at six other UW institutions to inquire about their enrollment and brainstorm recruitment ideas. Not surprisingly, all colleagues expressed similar challenges with enrollment and anxiety about the vitality of their programs. I somehow felt a sense of validation and belonging by convening with this impromptu faculty learning community and discovering that this reality indeed extends beyond my local context. In future months (and hopefully years), I plan to build these connections and further advocate for WLE across the state, including through the Wisconsin Association for Language Teachers (WAFLT), our state language association. In fact, I recently organized a panel with these colleagues to present at the 2025 WAFLT Conference about bridging the enrollment gap in WLE across UW institutions (Morris, 2025a).

In response to challenging times, the outreach efforts described in this section have resulted in many positive outcomes, including increased visibility for the WLE program both online and through class visits, the creation of marketing materials and news stories to promote language education across campus, and additional connections with language teachers at the K-12 level and across the UW system.

## Research

In addition to outreach, it has been beneficial to conduct research with recent graduates of WLE who are in their early years of teaching to discover the strengths and gaps in the program at UWL. Adopting a research-based approach with recent graduates serves three main purposes:

1. Identify how novice language teachers navigate their first few years leading their own classroom, including their main challenges and successes;
2. Use these findings to modify the curriculum in the WLE program to better prepare current and future students for the diverse realities they will face upon graduation;
3. Maintain a professional learning community with recent graduates that provides continued mentorship from a known and trusted professional in WLE.

For example, during the last two years, I have examined five recent graduates’ experiences teaching K-12 Spanish and identified several preliminary themes that demonstrate the successes and challenges of early career language teaching, which I presented at the AAAL 2024 Conference (Morris, 2024). These themes include **pedagogical agency, workplace support and mentorship, workload and balance, perceived impact, and identity construction**. The teachers demonstrated pedagogical agency by avoiding the traditional grammar-based approaches that were formerly used at their schools and instead adopted a

proficiency-based approach. Nonetheless, several expressed anxieties in doing so, as illustrated by one teacher who stated, “I’m just nervous that, like, I’m coming in and basically flipping the script.” Additionally, although previous research confirms that mentorship is key in the first years of teaching (Brown, 2001; Farrell, 2008), the teachers had varied experiences being mentored, depending on their schools. When discipline-specific mentorship was not available for those working in small language programs, the workplace support they received from other colleagues, including first-year teachers in other fields, was indispensable for their success. In terms of workload, the teachers taught a range of two-to-five course preps, yet all reported experiencing a very heavy workload during their first year and some reduction in year two. For instance, one teacher who identified as “a one-woman show,” as she was the only Spanish teacher at her high school, stated, “I am on the go always. It feels like there’s never enough time in the day.” Two of the five teachers also mentioned having to translate in addition to teaching, which contributed extra work to their already busy schedules, highlighting an uncompensated workload issue that educators in other disciplines typically do not face. Despite the heavy workload in the first year, the teachers reported an inspiration to teach Spanish because they wanted to have an impact in their school and community. The experiences of these teachers during their early years have undoubtedly impacted the formation of their professional identity, a crucial foundation for their future success (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013).

By identifying these themes, I have become aware of strengths of the WLE curriculum as well as areas that could be modified to maximize future students’ career readiness. For example, the program adequately prepared teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills necessary to design a proficiency-based curriculum that prioritizes functional language use in meaningful cultural contexts, as demonstrated through teachers’ pedagogical agency. The program also supported them in acknowledging the importance of language education in the wider community, which is evident in the theme of perceived impact. However, the existing WLE curriculum could be modified to help novice teachers balance a heavy workload by integrating additional practice designing thematic units and lessons across several levels. This is a change I am currently integrating in my methodology course this semester with the hopes that it provides enhanced career readiness. (See the next section for additional examples and ideas.)

Through this research project, I have not only been able to maintain a connection with recent graduates from my program but also continue to assist them through their early years on the job and offer guided mentorship and support, as needed. I have also been able to witness first-hand their evolving identity formation both as language teachers and humans. Because the insights gleaned from all participants have been mutually beneficial, I plan to continue this research project into the next year(s) in an effort to retain these quality language teachers and further build our professional learning communities.

## **Reform**

The lessons learned from conducting outreach and research can be used to reform both language and teacher preparation programs. In fact, Tang (2019) insists that “striving [language] programs tend to view their curriculum as a work in progress that periodically needs to be adapted to new national standards, changing local and institutional circumstances, and our current and future students’ needs.” This is where curricular redesign comes into play. For instance, in my methods courses in recent years, I have incorporated more tasks that promote agency and help students build their identity as future language teachers, including a textbook hack assignment centered on social justice, a creative teaching philosophy product (rather than a traditional essay), and frequent video-recorded lesson rehearsals that allow for specific coaching from both peers and the instructor. These changes were integrated as I continued to build my own identity as a language teacher and teacher educator, and informed by the many insights I have gained from engaging in applied linguistics research and conversations with others in the field at conferences including the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL), the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO), Language Teacher Education (LTE), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the Wisconsin Association for Language Teachers (WAFLT). Because I have become a better teacher when I was given agency and reflected on not only my own practices

but also prominent research findings in second language acquisition and pedagogy, I provide my students with the same opportunities to support their professional development and career readiness. Doing so has required frequent tweaks and revisions to update course readings and tasks. Curricular revisions have also been made recently in both the Spanish and French programs at UWL, aligning with shifts in the field and providing more relevant and marketable course offerings (see Morris & Brougham, 2021). In fall 2025, the Spanish program faculty began another full curricular redesign to better meet students' needs and the changing realities of language education in our current sociopolitical landscape. In the realm of WLE, I look forward to making additional changes to support my next cohort of students while also continuing to mentor and learn from my former students who are now novice teachers.

In addition to program and course redesign, Tang (2019) argues that faculty in successful language programs “pay attention to pathways into the program and welcome into their programs high school students, heritage language learners, community college students, and others interested in continuing their language education.” Reconceptualizing the various pipelines into the program can not only boost enrollment but also provide increased accessibility and a wider diversity of learners, thereby addressing larger issues of equity and social justice. For instance, we plan to collaborate with a high school within one hour of UWL that serves a majority of Hispanic students in an attempt to build a direct pipeline for native and heritage speakers interested in becoming teachers. Doing so would enhance both the enrollment and diversity of teacher candidates in the WLE program, which would indeed be a win-win. It would also require modifications to the curriculum to further support heritage pedagogies, such as reoffering our heritage Spanish class that has been suspended for years due to low enrollment. A specific heritage language pedagogies class (or module) could also be designed and shared with both pre-service teachers and local K-12 language teachers to help them meet the needs of the growing population of heritage speakers (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2023).

Furthermore, the two WLE faculty at UWL have recently discussed restructuring the program to eliminate requirements that may be potential barriers to enrollment. For instance, we plan to reduce the 14-week study abroad requirement, as it may discourage students who have a limited budget or timeline to graduation. Because the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction requires that WL teacher candidates participate in an extended immersion experience, the timing of this experience abroad could be reduced, the experience could be conducted as a “study away” program in the U.S. (see Del Carpio & Vana, 2024), and grant funding could be collected to attract more candidates to the program. Additionally, we could gather scholarship funds to cover the expenses of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview and Written Proficiency Test, since they are considered costly by students. Although these tests are required by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for teacher certification in World Languages, we are hopeful that alternative proficiency test options are considered in the future. For instance, the Avant STAMP test is a lower-cost option that maps proficiency to the ACTFL levels (Avant Assessment, 2023). Additionally, if provided the necessary training, faculty at UWL could implement the Modified Oral Proficiency Interview (MOPI) to evaluate students' proficiency at no cost. This would, however, add to our already heavy workload.

In addition to reforming these requirements in the WLE program, we are in the process of designing a Certificate in Spanish for Teachers for teacher candidates who want to be able to communicate with their future students and their families in Spanish but are not interested in teaching Spanish as a second or heritage language. Although this certificate option will not address the enrollment issues or teacher shortage in WLE, it will better prepare future teachers with the linguistic and intercultural competencies necessary to meet the needs of their diverse students in the future, considering that approximately 13% of students in Wisconsin identified as Hispanic in 2020 (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020). This certificate option offers students an additional pathway to a language program that is directly applicable to their future career, thus aligning with Tang's (2019) recommendation of radiating outward.

## Reflection on Invisible and Emotion Labor

The actions I have engaged in to maintain the vitality of WLE at UWL, while beneficial, have not come without an expense. The heavy burden of preserving WLE has significantly contributed to my workload and required considerable emotion labor, often feeling like an uphill battle. Working across two colleges (in languages and teacher education) has also been an isolating experience, as other language faculty in my department simply cannot fathom the many intricacies of teacher preparation nor the time and energy required to keep the WLE program afloat in rough waters, especially considering the decrease in K-12 language programs and teachers in our local community. At times, it feels like I do not fully belong in either division because I must split my time so intentionally to be able to meet the needs of the program and my students in both Spanish and WLE. At the end of each day, I have barely scratched the surface of my to-do list, which leaves little time for me to meet my own needs as a human. While I was aware of the heavy teaching load (4/4, or 24 credits total in the fall and spring semesters) when I accepted my tenure-track position in 2017, I did not imagine the burnout I would feel after consistently teaching different course preps each semester, attending twice the meetings as my language colleagues, and having to worry that the program I lead may cease to exist if I do not keep it alive, and that my position may face the same fate. Nevertheless, I am grateful for the course release I have been granted each semester to compensate for my duties as the director of WLE (along with K-12 Art and Music Education), as it has provided me with additional time to tackle the hefty workload required. As of Spring 2027, the course release will be discontinued to align with new UW System policy. Even with a course release, and as a tenured associate professor, I still struggle balancing my workload, as I currently serve on several department, university and UW system committees and task forces, am a liaison for two concurrent enrollment programs with local high schools (for Spanish and Ho-Chunk), mentor undergraduate researchers in the UWL Eagle Apprentice program, and engage in frequent outreach activities, all while teaching and maintaining an active research agenda in my mid-career. Though demanding, I continue to advocate for language education because of the joy it brings me and the critical value it holds in our increasingly divided society. Within this new normal, the topic of emotion labor has gained recent traction in applied linguistics research (see De Costa & Nazari, 2024), highlighting the need to develop critical emotion literacy during these precarious times for language educators and learners.

## Conclusion

The three-pronged approach outlined in this paper involving outreach, research, and program reform responds to an urgent call for advocacy during a time in which language learning in general is in decline. To help language programs navigate this new normal and new urgency, several organizations in the field have provided free resources to advocate for language education across various levels, ranging from local interactions with community members all the way to connecting with legislators (see AAUSC, 2019; ACTFL, 2025d; Joint National Committee for Languages, 2020; Language Connects Foundation, 2025). These materials include key reports summarizing essential information about the current realities of language education, infographics and printouts that can be shared across classrooms, campus, and the community, and even tips to communicate with important stakeholders to champion language teaching and learning. Although these resources were carefully curated and are readily available, they will only exist as tools in a toolbox unless language teachers, scholars, and advocates intentionally put them into practice.

These advocacy efforts, though more necessary now than ever, inevitably require not only an increased workload but also extensive yet invisible emotion labor, including the burden of legitimizing language learning and teaching among students, colleagues, and the wider community (Acheson et al., 2016; Mason, 2015). While this work can indeed be isolating, as language teachers are often solely responsible for their language programs across many levels (Ewart, 2009; Mason, 2015; Swanson & Huff, 2010), we simply cannot do it alone, nor should we try. By relying on the expertise and voices of all members involved, the collaborative advocacy efforts outlined in this report seek to not simply maintain WLE at UWL for the time being but rather grow it in the future across Wisconsin and beyond. This increasingly urgent advocacy work

can serve to mitigate the many challenges outlined throughout this report in the spirit of creating a more positive and sustainable future for WLE.

## References

- AAUSC. (2019). *Checklist for advocacy for threatened programs and departments*. <https://aausc.wildapricot.org/checklist>
- Acheson, K., Taylor, J., & Luna, K. (2016). The burnout spiral: The emotion labor of five rural U.S. foreign language teachers. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(2), 522–537. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12333>
- ACTFL. (2025a). *ACTFL Statement of Support to World Language Educators*. <https://www.actfl.org/news/actfl-statement-of-support-to-world-language-educators>
- ACTFL. (2025b). *ACTFL Statement on English Designated as the Official Language of the United States*. <https://www.actfl.org/news/actfl-statement-on-designating-english-as-official-language#:~:text=ACTFL%20stands%20against%20the%20recent,other%20than%20English%20at%20home>
- ACTFL. (2025c). *ACTFL Statement Supporting the U.S. Department of Education*. <https://www.actfl.org/news/actfl-statement-supporting-us-department-of-education#:~:text=Likewise%2C%20federal%20grants%20also%20provide,%2C%20security%2C%20and%20global%20interaction>
- ACTFL. (2025d). *Language advocacy resource center*. <https://www.actfl.org/advocacy-and-public-education/language-advocacy-resource-center>
- American Academy of Arts and Sciences. (2017). *America's languages: Investing in language education for the 21st century*. <https://www.amacad.org/publication/americas-languages>
- Avant Assessment. (2023, October 5). *Avant STAMP and the ACTFL proficiency guidelines*. Blog. <https://www.avantassessment.com/blog/avant-stamp-and-the-actfl-proficiency-guidelines>
- Brown, K. (2001). Mentoring and the retention of newly qualified language teachers. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 31(1), 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640124093>
- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2023, March 31). *Heritage language education in the U.S.: Research, policies, and practice*. <https://www.cal.org/heritage-language-education-in-the-u-s-research-policies-and-practice/#:~:text=for%20Applied%20Linguistics-,%20Heritage%20Language%20Education%20in%20the%20U.S.:%20Research%2C%20Policies%20and%20Practice,to%20a%20heritage%20language%20approach>
- De Costa, P. I. & Nazari, M (2024). Emotion as pedagogy: Why the emotion labor of L2 educators matters. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 62(3), 1159–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2024-0218>
- Del Carpio, L., & Vana, R. (2024). (Re)imagining study away as a tool towards linguistic inclusion, equity, and social justice for speakers of US Spanish. In L. Padilla & R. Vana (Eds.), *Representation, inclusion, and social justice in world language teaching: Research and pedagogy for inclusive classrooms* (pp. 145–165). Routledge.
- Ewart, G. (2009). Retention of new teachers in minority French and French immersion programs in Manitoba. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 32(3), 473–507. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/3049>
- Farrell, T. (2008). *Novice Language Teachers Insights and Perspectives for the First Year*. Equinox.

- Ferry, M. M. (2025). Applying systems thinking to address invisible and emotional labor in language programs. In S. Goertler (Respondent), *New normal, new urgency: Invisible and emotion labor in language program advocacy* [Panel presentation]. 2025 MLA Convention, New Orleans, LA.
- Goetze, J. (2025). ‘Are you okay?’: Language instructors’ health and well-being in program leadership and administration. In S. Goertler (Respondent), *New normal, new urgency: Invisible and emotion labor in language program advocacy* [Panel presentation]. 2025 MLA Convention, New Orleans, LA.
- Hanlon, A. R. (2023). *West Virginia University is everything that’s wrong with higher education today*. The New Republic. <https://newrepublic.com/article/176202/west-virginia-university-higher-education-enrollment-cliff-cuts?fbclid=IwAR2SEKqbgIz8yEz6bUiI7tOlq5thypO8AAkZvQN4aDGwkcurxoFyZ9Hr7d8>
- Joint National Committee for Languages. (2020). *Advocacy*. <https://www.languagepolicy.org/advocacy-resources>
- Kammerud, J., Meyer, J., Kundert, J., Hiam, A. (2024). 2022 educator preparation program and workforce analysis report. *Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction*. <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/education-workforce/pdf/2022-wi-epp-workforce-annual-report.pdf>
- Language Connects Foundation. (2025, August 10). *Free resources*. <https://www.languageconnectsfoundation.org/connect-with-language>
- Lusin, N., Peterson, T., Sulewski, C., & Zafer, R. (2023). Enrollments in languages other than English in US Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2021. *Modern Language Association of America*. <https://www.mla.org/content/download/191324/file/Enrollments-in-Languages-Other-Than-English-in-US-Institutions-of-Higher-Education-Fall-2021.pdf>
- Machtig, A. (2024, April 12). Nearly 40% of Wisconsin teachers leave in 6 years: Report. *Wisconsin State Journal*. [https://madison.com/news/state-regional/education/wisconsin-teachers-dpi-shortage-pay/article\\_b0469220-f77d-11ee-8bac-eb3d0aca0482.html](https://madison.com/news/state-regional/education/wisconsin-teachers-dpi-shortage-pay/article_b0469220-f77d-11ee-8bac-eb3d0aca0482.html)
- Mason, S. (2015). ‘Hey, I’m a real teacher!’ The value of language teachers and the role of non-contact time in Queensland primary schools. *New Zealand Language Teacher*, 41(1), 9-22.
- Morris, K. (2024). *From student to teacher: Exploring first-year Spanish teachers’ experiences and perceptions* [Conference presentation]. AAAL 2024 Conference, Houston, TX.
- Morris, K. (2025a). *Bridging the enrollment gap of world language education across the UWs* [Conference presentation]. WAFLT 2025 Conference, Oshkosh, WI.
- Morris, K. (2025b). Reach out, research, and reform: Strengthening world language education in Wisconsin. In S. Goertler (Respondent), *New normal, new urgency: Invisible and emotion labor in language program advocacy* [Panel presentation]. 2025 MLA Convention, New Orleans, LA.
- Morris, K. & Brougham, R.M. (2021). Reconceptualizing Spanish teaching and learning in disruptive times: Transformations from curriculum redesign. *Hispania*, 104(1), 356-362.
- Rosa, J. & Flores, N. (2023). Rethinking language barriers & social justice from a raciolinguistic perspective. *Daedalus*, 152 (3): 99–114. Doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_02020](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02020)
- Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2013). Struggling for a professional identity: Two newly qualified language teachers’ identity narratives during the first years at work. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 30, 120-129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.11.002>

- Stephens, C., Hall, T., & McCampbell, C. (2015). The 2015 Georgia public P-12 teacher workforce. A status report. *Georgia Professional Standards Commission*.  
[https://www.gapsc.com/Commission/Research\\_Publication/downloads/2015%20Status%20Report.pdf](https://www.gapsc.com/Commission/Research_Publication/downloads/2015%20Status%20Report.pdf)
- Swanson, P., & Huff, R. (2010). The relationship of Georgia's rural foreign language teachers' sense of efficacy to teacher attrition. *The Rural Educator*, 31(3), 16-29.  
<https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v31i3.957>
- Swanson, P. & Mason, S. (2018). The world language teacher shortage: Taking a new direction. *Foreign Language Annals*, 51(1), 251–262. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12321>
- Tang, L. (2019). Against smallness: How successful language programs reimagine the humanities. *MLA Profession*. <https://profession.mla.org/against-smallness-how-successful-language-programs-reimagine-the-humanities/>
- Thompson, A. S. (2024). Introduction to the special issue on languages other than English: A reality check and a glimmer of hope. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 14(1), 17–22.  
<https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.42366>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2025). *Teacher shortage areas*. <https://tsa.ed.gov/#/reports>
- WECAN. (2025). *Public vacancy search*. <https://wecan.waspa.org/Vacancy/PublicSearch>
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2020). *Wisconsin public schools at a glance*.  
[https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/eis/pdf/schools\\_at\\_a\\_glance.pdf](https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/eis/pdf/schools_at_a_glance.pdf)
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (n.d.). *World language programs*.  
<https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/WL>

## About the Author

Kimberly Morris is Associate Professor of Spanish and Director of World Language Education at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. She teaches a variety of courses in Spanish linguistics, second language acquisition, and language teaching methodologies. Her research interests include L2 pragmatics, language teacher education, technology-enhanced language learning, and curriculum design.

**E-mail:** [kmorris2@uwlax.edu](mailto:kmorris2@uwlax.edu)