

body language: PT students learn Spanish for future careers

To better serve their future patients, PT students learn Spanish over lunch

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The noise of lunch on Tuesdays is usually mundane at best, but at the School of Health Sciences, the sounds of Spanish are thrown into the mix. Students there aren't just attending physical therapy classes.

More than a dozen students have signed up to take weekly conversational Spanish classes focused on vocabulary and dialogue they may encounter as physical therapists.

Paula DiBiasio, associate professor of physical therapy education, is one of the individuals that helped connect the School of Health Sciences with El Centro de Español — a connection she believes will improve her students' abilities to do their jobs in the future.

"Cultural competence in healthcare providers can help reduce disparity in groups," DiBiasio said. "Being culturally competent can increase trust and promote empowerment with people's involvement in their own healthcare."

But over the years she has worked with El Centro, DiBiasio has found that they do so much more than just teach Spanish.

"At El Centro, our students also learn so much about culture and heritage," DiBiasio said. "This helps



Diana Prieto Viñas, assistant director of the Spanish Center, welcomes physical therapy students during the first day of conversational Spanish classes in the School of Health Sciences on Sept. 11.

students understand their own culture and allows them to learn and be exposed to other cultures."

DiBiasio's counterpart at El Centro who teaches these weekly classes is Diana Prieto Viñas, assistant director of the Spanish Center.

In order to make the class the most relevant for her students, Prieto Viñas focuses her teaching material on medical terms.

"I developed a curriculum for these classes so they could learn more specific language about the parts of the body," Prieto Viñas said. "The curriculum is also based on the dialogues patients and doctors

have in the workplace."

At the end of every class, Prieto Viñas encourages students to suggest topics they should cover in class.

"My goal is to make sure they can learn vocabulary that will help them deal with different situations in their work," Prieto Viñas said. "I want them to have these Spanish skills so they can go and work with these populations."

One of the regulars in this class is Trishia Yada, a second-year student in the Doctor of Physical Therapy program. Her interest in the class was sparked when she learned it

would be focusing on medical terminology.

The hour-long weekly classes have already helped Yada in her role as a student volunteer in the Health Outreach Program of Elon Clinic. Yada's first patient at the HOPE Clinic was a native-Spanish speaker.

"At that point, I was still learning the basics of Spanish, but I was able to understand certain phrases and words the patient was saying," Yada said. "Being able to communicate with her was really helpful because I was able to hear directly from her and figure out what I could do to help."



BEING CULTURALLY COMPETENT CAN INCREASE TRUST AND PROMOTE EMPOWERMENT WITH PEOPLE'S INVOLVEMENT IN THEIR OWN HEALTHCARE.

PAULA DIBIASIO
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF PHYSICAL THERAPY EDUCATION

Giving students such as Yada the tools to communicate effectively with their patients is what both DiBiasio and Viñas want to continue to do.

While DiBiasio works with other departments at Elon to add more languages to the lunchtime rumble, Viñas continues to plan ways to expand the current Spanish program.

Ideas of holding lunch class twice a week, adding a night class and introducing an intermediate level are all in discussion. Growing this program by offering more opportunities is one of Prieto Viñas' top priorities.

"We live in a global society, and we are in contact with people from different cultures and different backgrounds every day," Prieto Viñas said. "We need to be able to communicate with them, especially if it is about their health."

Students face comments containing hidden assumptions

Though often unintentional, Latino students are harmed by microaggressions

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"No, where are you *really* from?"

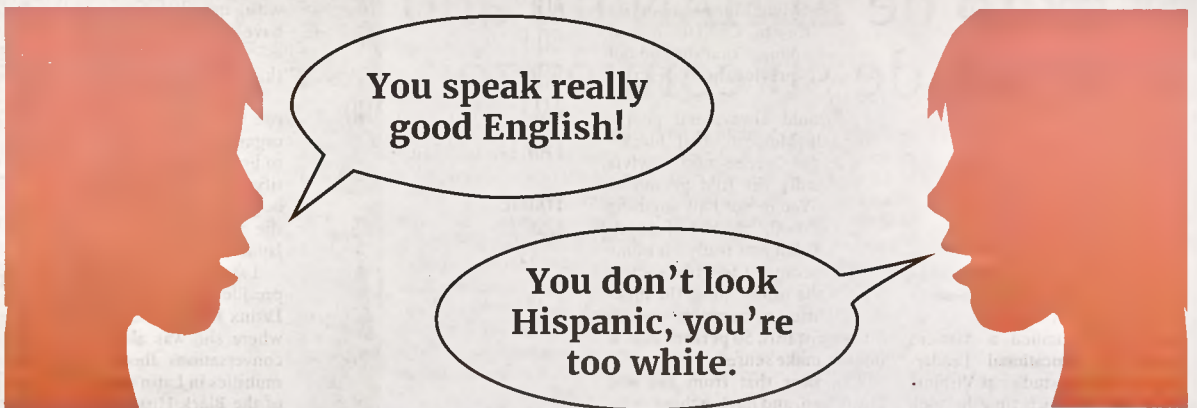
It's a question sophomore Mackenzie Martinez hears a lot. She responds with the truth. She's from Richmond, Virginia. But because of her brown skin and black hair, she encounters a lot of people who are looking for a different answer. Martinez' ancestral background makes

her much more diverse than meets the eye. Her dad is half Mexican and half French Canadian, and her mom is Jewish. So when someone asks surprised that she's "from" Richmond and not somewhere more exotic, she says it's a comment that cuts deep.

"It's undermining who you are," Martinez said. "It's dehumanizing in a lot of ways. Because I'm a human being, I'm a friend, I'm a sister, I'm a student, I'm all these things. But at the end of the day, what so many people only see is I'm Hispanic, I'm ethnic, I'm different, I'm not your norm. And that's all they see."

And that's not the only question she has to deal with. Her days are strewn with comments that aren't intentionally harmful, but still make pernicious assumptions about who she is.

"In every Spanish class I've ever been in," Martinez said, "someone has made a comment to me within



GRACE TERRY | ASSISTANT DESIGN CHIEF

the first week of school about my ethnicity. Like, 'Oh, don't you speak Mexican at home?'"

She recalled one instance from earlier this semester. On the first day of Spanish class, an acquaintance took the desk next to her and said that she always likes sitting next to a fluent speaker. Martinez, whose half-Mexican father didn't even grow up speaking Spanish, doesn't consider herself fluent.

"I'm not fluent, I'm just brown," she explained to the classmate in a retort that was met with nervous laughter.

These types of comments and questions — the offhand remarks and the unknowingly ignorant assumptions — they all fall into the category of "microaggression."

In fact, microaggressions are, by definition, subtle, indirect or unintentional. They're the day-to-day behaviors and comments that communicate derogatory or prejudiced attitudes toward a member of a marginalized group or minority.

"It's nothing as extreme as police brutality or anything," Marti-



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MACKENZIE MARTINEZ
SOPHOMORE

nez said. "It's not like that kind of inequality or discrimination, but it's just enough that it gets under your skin and just kind of stays with you for a long time."

Because they can be so subtle and unintentional, Latino students reported experiencing microaggressions fairly regularly.

Christina Gallegos said she's no stranger to that "where are you really from" question. She's heard it from another student at a party, from a random passerby walking his dog.

"Especially for Latino / Hispanic people," Gallegos said, "they're all just labeled as immigrants, not accounting for the fact that a lot of them were actually born here. And even though like our parents are immigrants, we're Americans, we are more American than we are Hispanic."

Those types of questions, she says, contribute to the alienation of non-white people in America, while those with European ancestry never have to explain their backgrounds.

"It's just funny," Gallegos said, "because they don't ask themselves,

"Where are you from, what is your European ethnicity or where did your grandparents come from?" I feel like white people have some damn nerves to be asking people where they're from when their grandparents are immigrants as well."

While the comments often fall short of being blatant racism or intentional acts of hostility, they still make those on the receiving end feel uncomfortable and marginalized. Senior Lily Sobalvarro says that people shouldn't have to understand the full complexity of microaggressions to understand why they should stop saying them.

"It's easy for people to dismiss microaggressions and say that we're being too sensitive, or she was just curious, or it was meant as a harmless question," Sobalvarro said. "At the end of the day it's all intention versus impact. While your intentions may be good, the impact that it has on other people should ultimately outweigh your intentions. You could have the best intentions in the world, but if it's causing harm, then you should stop."