

Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico

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(coordinadoras)



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Profiling a Cohort in the BA Degree in English at the University of Veracruz

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Introduction

The studies of students' academic history and trajectory provide educational institutions and university programs with invaluable information. The research not only profiles who is enrolling in universities today but identifies which variables are present in the student population and how they favor or hinder students' performance. The short-term impact of such studies may allow the institutions to plan retention strategies according to the characteristics of a set cohort of the student body. Intermediate-term results could provide information on which types of issues affect students' academic development positively or negatively and, furthermore, perhaps detect particular moments of vulnerability when students may decide to leave the university in response to difficulties. Long-term studies of a cohort may help determine to what extent an institution contributes to students' academic development as well as what impact the educative preparation has on graduates' professional and personal lives. In short, academic-trajectory studies provide data that can be used to make more informed academic and administrative decisions related to improving the quality of service universities offer their students.

Cognizant of the impact of such studies, a group of teacher-researchers from the BA degree in English at the University of Veracruz (UV) decided to carry out a

longitudinal study of the 2014 cohort. Given the potential significance of such studies, the teacher-researchers were surprised to find that no previous investigation of this type had been done at the University of Veracruz. This chapter reports on the initial stage of the study aimed at following the academic trajectory of the 2014 cohort in the BA degree in English at UV's School of Languages. Considering that the main goal of a longitudinal study is to trace closely the movement of the cohort as they live their university experience in order to identify students' characteristics as they matriculate, proceed along their trajectories, graduate with a degree, and find their places in the labor market, the researchers decided to study this cohort from the very beginning (during the first semester) of their higher education.

To understand the context of the research study, this chapter begins with a description of the University of Veracruz, a profile of the School of Languages that hosts the BA degree in English, and an explanation of the main characteristics of the degree. A review of two recent studies pertinent to the current research is followed by a brief description of the methodology used to conduct the study, an analysis of the findings of the first stage of the research, and concluding remarks.

The University of Veracruz, or *Universidad Veracruzana*, is a large public university comprising 74 schools, 24 institutes, 17 research centers, and six language centers (UV Números, September 2014). It is by far the largest and most important Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the state of Veracruz as it is present in 28 cities and towns throughout the state. UV serves 27.21% of the higher education demand in Veracruz with 62,522 registered students in the 2014-2015 academic term.

According to a recently published report (Onofre, 2014), UV was fourth in a ranking of universities in Mexico, considering the number of full-time teachers with doctoral degrees. This is the result of a steady growth in the number of teachers completing doctoral degrees in recent years. Similarly, UV occupies fifth place in Mexico when the number of teachers with a master's degree is the descriptive criterion and sixth place, when the number of full-time teachers is considered. More importantly, the University of Veracruz would be ranked seventh if only public universities were considered and fourth if only public state universities were taken into consideration. The report clarifies that the ranking is the result of several indicators, such as teaching quality (size of teaching staff, teaching hours, and staff academic degrees); employability (by surveying Mexican companies); postgraduate courses; and international prestige (comparing several international rankings).

The University of Veracruz was founded on September 11, 1944. It has undergone important changes throughout its evolution. These changes are mainly realized in the wide variety of fields represented, the number of areas of training and career

opportunities offered, and the quantity and quality of the programs related to research activities, university outreach, and cultural dissemination.

At present, the main campus of the Universidad Veracruzana is located in Xalapa, the capital city of the state of Veracruz. UV has four other campuses throughout the state located in the regions of Veracruz-Boca del Río, Córdoba-Orizaba, Poza Rica-Tuxpan, and Coatzacoalcos-Minatitlán. The university offers a wide range of academic programs: 56 undergraduate programs, 67 postgraduate courses, and 12 higher technical degrees. The educational programs are divided into six academic areas: Humanities, Technical, Economic-Administrative, Health Sciences, Biological and Agricultural Sciences, and the Arts.

The dynamics of research, teaching, university outreach, and cultural dissemination reflect the important role that UV plays in society – a role that is reflected in its efforts to transform students into qualified professionals. In 1999, aware of the complexity involved in this process, UV made a significant change in its philosophy of higher education by implementing its own educational model, called Integral and Flexible Educational Model, (MEIF, Modelo Educativo Integral y Flexible). MEIF is a student-centered model based and organized on a division of curricular areas and a credit system that allows students to choose their *educational experiences* (EEs) and a timetable for completing them that suits their needs and interests.

One of the key components of MEIF is the study of five main EEs, enabling students from different departments to gain knowledge that will allow them to be more competitive in today's world. The five EEs are part of the Basic Education Area. This, in practice, means that all undergraduate students must take these courses regardless of the degree program in which they are enrolled. The EEs are English I, English II, Computer Science, Reading and Writing through Analysis of the Contemporary World, and Critical and Creative Thinking. Because a solid grounding in English is essential for participation and success in present-day society, students must learn the language, no matter their specialized fields of study. English is a fundamental tool in the arsenal of knowledge that prepares students to overcome cultural barriers they will inevitably face at some point in their professional careers.

The School of Languages at UV is where students train to become teachers of English. The School was established in 1961 when a technical degree in English was offered. In 1965, the School began offering a degree known as *Teacher of English at the Middle Level* whose main objective was to prepare students to be English teachers in middle schools. Although its curriculum varied from year to year, it always covered the following areas: English-language acquisition, aspects of teaching English, English-language cultures, Spanish, and other supporting courses that enabled the School to fulfill its main objective of training teachers. In 1968, a new curriculum

was adopted offering a BA degree in English. This curriculum was repeatedly revised until 1990, when it officially adopted the name BA degree in English offering a 10-semester curriculum comprising six common-core semesters and four semesters in which students could opt to specialize in teaching, literature, or translation.

In 2008, a new curriculum was designed and implemented following the MEIF guidelines. As described earlier, MEIF is a flexible model based on a credit system, where students decide the educational experiences they will have, the time schedule of the EEs, and the teachers who will give the courses. What is more, MEIF promotes not only students' specializing in academic areas of their own choosing but offers students the chance to have EEs in such areas as the arts and sports that may be outside their focus of specialization.

Today, the School of Languages at the University of Veracruz comprises three BA degrees (English, French, and English Teaching) and three postgraduate degrees (an MA in TEFL, an MA in French Didactics, and a PhD in Language Studies and Applied Linguistics). In addition, it also has a Department of Foreign Languages that is a language center where students not only study a third or fourth language but conduct their practice teaching which contributes to their training.

The BA degree in English, *Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa (LLI)*, admits 220 students each year (approximately 40% of the demand). The total population of registered LLI students for the August-December 2014 term numbered 650; the research-participants in this study belong to a cohort that consists of 221 students. According to the 2008 curriculum, LLI aims to train students for professions that demand a good command of the English language and critical and creative thinking skills. Students prepare to use these skills in various environments where English is the main requirement, e.g., teaching English at different educational levels. LLI graduates contribute their knowledge and expertise to workplace settings (often classrooms) and to society at large through a learned awareness of identity, tolerance, and solidarity with other cultures.

LLI has two main objectives: to help students develop a good command of English equivalent to a C1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and to provide students with the basic competences needed to perform adequately in teaching and/or translation professions, as well as in any other area in which English is the main vehicle for communication. According to the 2008 curriculum, students must earn 318 credits to graduate. The BA can be completed in five or up to 10 continuous terms (Universidad Veracruzana, *Lengua Inglesa*, 2008), but the standard trajectory is projected to take seven terms. The syllabus is divided into four main areas of knowledge: Basic Education (*Formación Básica*), Education in a Particular Discipline (*Area de Formacion Disciplinar*),

Educational Specialty (Area de Formación Terminal), and Electives (Area de Formación de Elección Libre). The Basic Education area consists of 30 credits comprised of the EEs that are compulsory for students of all BAs. The Particular Discipline area is made up of 136 credits, all related to courses in the English BA. The Educational Specialty area consists of 38 credits in which students may define their professional profile by enrolling in EEs that reflect their academic preferences (teaching or translation). The Electives area (16 credits) consists of EEs that students choose from a range of options including courses in sports, the arts, languages, and educational experiences offered in UV's other degree programs.

In LLI, the *educational experiences* (EEs) are grouped in knowledge areas such as: Language, Teaching, Translation, Linguistics, Spanish, Culture, and Research. Several EEs from these knowledge areas complement students' training and development. Given the characteristics of an LLI education, there is a strong component of English courses made up of six different levels: Beginner, Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, and Advanced. The English courses are based on the Common European Framework of Reference levels (A1 to C2). In order to graduate, students should ideally reach the C1 level but are required to obtain only a certification equivalent to B2.

LLI students must take three different standardized exams in each term. The first two exams are mainly based on the information the students acquire during the term; that is, they are *achievement* tests. Students are evaluated in the areas of English grammar, vocabulary, and language functions. The third exam is a skills-based or *proficiency* examination. The English courses are complemented by other EEs in which English serves as both the means of communication and the content so that students not only increase their English level but also gain competences in other areas of knowledge related to teaching such as Linguistics, Culture, and Literature.

The teaching staff in LLI consists of 66 teachers of which 32 are tenured teachers, 22 are permanent teachers, and 12 are under term contracts. Twelve percent of the teachers hold a PhD degree, 75% hold a masters' degree, 6% have a Diploma in TEFL, and 7% have a BA degree. It is evident that the teaching staff is well qualified with 93% having postgraduate studies. LLI holds both the CIEES (Comités Interinstitucionales de la Evaluación de la Educación Superior) evaluation and the COAPEHUM (Consejo para la Acreditación de Programas Educativos en Humanidades) accreditation as a quality BA degree program.

Regarding infrastructure, LLI has a Resource Center and a Self-Access Center available exclusively for its students. In addition, the UV campus has a library and a computing center, both of which are available to LLI students who also have full access to UV's Internet connection both wired and wireless.

As noted earlier, the study's teacher-researchers found no trace of previous investigations of academic trajectories in the BA program in English at the University of Veracruz. Therefore, the current study aims to fill the existing knowledge gap on this relevant topic. Interestingly, the findings of two recent studies are germane to this objective. The studies addressed the LLI experience, the BA program in English, from the frames of reference of its various participants or actors.

In the first study, Hernández and Narváez (2014) investigated the dropout phenomenon in LLI. In the study, teams of teacher-researchers explored the perspectives of teachers, high-achievement students, and at-risk students, and considered institutional data in search of plausible explanations for the high rate of attrition at the institution. The study provided an in-depth description of how different players envision the educational environment and its effects on students' academic behavior. The authors concluded that student abandonment is a multifactor phenomenon and as such it is difficult to describe precisely. Hernández and Narváez highlighted that the educational practices in LLI appear to be traditional and hierarchical and that this seems not only to affect students' motivation but also to cause negative attitudes toward the program. This information is valuable for the current research described in this chapter, considering that a student trajectory may be interrupted or delayed due to factors identified as influential in the Hernández and Narváez study.

The other recent study (Narváez, Estrada, and Núñez, 2015) investigated students', teachers', and graduates' perceptions of the curriculum. Three groups of student-participants reported a positive perception of the BA program's objectives and found the components of the curriculum to be pertinent. Likewise, the degree of satisfaction regarding the curriculum was relatively high in the three groups. The researchers learned that the teaching staff identified research as one of the strengths of the program; additionally, both students and graduates regarded research and linguistics as strengths of the curriculum. Nonetheless, the degree of satisfaction with the curriculum varied as students advanced through the program; in other words, they seemed to value the curriculum more positively toward the conclusion of their studies. This finding appears to open a research path that focuses on the development of the academic trajectory in order to identify a breaking point (or points) in which students change their perspective toward the LLI curriculum.

With these antecedents in mind, the teacher-researchers decided to participate in this project investigating school trajectories of students in Language Teaching programs in public universities in Mexico as a way to deepen their understanding of the students who decide to study in LLI. The information provided here may be useful for teachers, school authorities, and teacher trainers. For instance, knowledge of the salient characteristics of students contributes to informed decision-making by

teachers, tutors, and administrators charged with supporting appropriate teaching approaches and methodologies, implementing retention strategies, detecting precise moments of student vulnerability, and recognizing specific issues affecting student trajectories – all considerations that impact students' experiences in higher education.

Methodology

An earlier chapter in this book describes in detail the methodology guiding this research study; therefore, this chapter's description of methods focuses on the data-collection procedure at the University of Veracruz and the characteristics of UV's student-participants.

The data were gathered using a three-part questionnaire addressing students' demographic and socioeconomic realities, their perceptions (using a Likert scale) of seven factors affecting successful academic trajectories, and their overall personal response to the BA program. The questionnaire was administered in mid-September 2014, following a piloting of the research instrument in August at the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo. The student-respondents in the UV program were contacted in their classrooms by the Admissions Secretary and their English teachers and invited to participate in the study.

Because there are four student groups in the morning shift and four in the afternoon, the teacher-researchers decided to survey two groups from each shift in order to make the sample more representative. With the cooperation of the Admissions Secretary and the teachers, a date was chosen to survey students. This planning strategy proved useful in that the data collection was accomplished in a day. As described in detail below, a total of 108 students (48.9% of the cohort) responded to the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion of Results

The results and the accompanying discussion of the results use quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation to focus on students' characteristics and aspects of their academic trajectories as reflected in the data collected in the three-part questionnaire.

Section A, the first section of the questionnaire, focused on the student-participants' general characteristics, their socioeconomic conditions, and their previous academic trajectory. The total sample of participants, 108 students, represents 48.9% of the total population of the 2014 cohort ($n = 221$). Of this sample, 60.19% are female and 39.81% are male. Their ages range from 12 to 36 years old;

48.15% of the surveyed students are 18 years old, and 22.22% are 19 years old. These data suggest that most respondents (70.37%) have just finished their high school education. This seems to indicate that the majority of students have followed a linear or *standard* basic-education school trajectory. There is an exceptional case, however: One student was admitted to the university at the age of 12. This student is the first identified-gifted student in LLI; following this student's academic path would certainly be of interest to researchers involved in studying gifted students.

The great majority of students (94.44%) are single and do not have children (94.44%). Most are from the state of Veracruz (84.27%). Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that only 33.3% of the students come from Xalapa, which means that the majority (66.7%) have had to move outside their hometowns to enter the BA program in LLI. This fact – having to leave home in order to study at the university – may have implications beyond the obvious. This aspect alone has thus far not been considered as a variable in school-trajectory studies. It is worth paying close attention to what extent this variable of “leaving home” may influence students' academic paths.

Turning to socioeconomic conditions, a great majority of respondents do not work (87.04%), and most of those who are employed work only a few hours a day: five or fewer hours (73.33%), which mean that they can be considered full-time students. Regarding the level of studies their parents completed, the students in this study present a varied profile. However, in most cases, their parents have not studied at the higher education level (fathers, 63.9%; mothers, 72.2%). This is reflected in the parents' occupations: Approximately 52% of fathers work in areas that do not require a professional degree, 54.63% of mothers are homemakers, and approximately 19% of mothers work outside the home in areas that do not require higher education studies. Importantly enough, the majority of the student-participants (65.74%) identify themselves as middle class. It would be interesting to keep this variable in mind as the academic-trajectory study progresses to determine what impact, if any, parents' educational backgrounds and occupations have on their children's success in the program.

Another variable identified as an important factor in determining successful academic trajectory is students' academic history. As all the student-participants have just initiated their higher education studies, the only other academic performance they have had relates to where they studied prior to entering LLI. The great majority of the participants come from public high schools (79.63%); if one assumes that those coming from open systems (students attending classes on Saturday) also belong to the public system, then the percentage increases to 87.04%. Most of the students (54.63%) earned a GPA between 8.0 and 8.9 in high school; another 17.61% earned a GPA higher than 9.0. It can be said that most of the respondents appear to represent *average* or *typical* students in the English Language BA at UV.

The student demographics described thus far, based on research participants' responses in Section A of the questionnaire, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Profile of the Research Population

<i>Demographic</i>		<i>August-December 2014 Cohort</i>	
Sex		Male (39.8%)	Female (60.2%)
Marital Status		Single (94.4%)	
Age		18 (48.1%)	
Origin Locality	State	State of Veracruz (84.3%)	
		Outside of Xalapa (66.7%)	
Work		No (87%)	
Studies	Father	No higher education (63.9 %)	
	Mother	No higher education (72.2 %)	
Social Status		Middle class (65.7%)	
Previous Studies		Public system (87%)	
GPA in High School		8.0 - 8.9 (54.6%)	

Section A of the questionnaire also asked students to identify which courses they find most and least difficult. Because the students in this cohort have begun their studies only recently, they have had minimal exposure to EEs (*educational experiences*). Of the few EEs they are taking, students identified *Fundamentos de la Cultura Contemporánea* (Fundamentals of Contemporary Culture) as the most difficult. It is important to remember that since the students were surveyed at an early stage in their BA program, it is likely they are still in the process of forming opinions about their courses.

The last portion of Section A addressed tutorials. According to UV's institutional policies, all students are assigned a tutor. Tutors and tutees must meet three times during the school term. At the time of the data collection, the participants in the study had had only one official tutoring session; in other words, their exposure to the tutorial process and their tutors was minimal, as eight students reported. Nonetheless, students mentioned that they attended the tutoring session for an array of reasons, mainly because they had questions about how the BA and the university work (40%). Other students (26%) stated that they attended the tutorial session to seek support; some students clearly expressed that they seek to improve their academic performance.

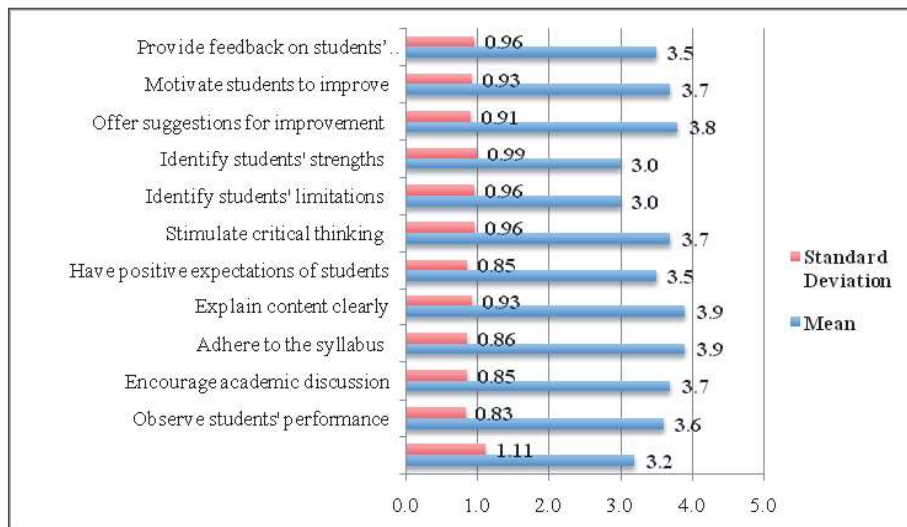
As indicated earlier, Section B of the questionnaire addressed seven factors considered relevant in studying academic trajectory. Six of the factors correspond to

students' perceptions of the following: their *teachers' performance*, the *theoretical and practical knowledge of the courses*, the *BA program itself*, *academic difficulties due to external factors*, *academic difficulties caused by personal factors*, and the *tutorial system*. The seventh factor, identified as Factor 6 in the questionnaire, relates to *students' vocational beliefs and expectations*.

For every variable in the seven identified factors, the students selected Likert-scale options to register their opinions and/or perceptions: 5 - *Totally Agree*; 4 - *Agree*; 3 - *Neutral*; 2 - *Disagree*; and 1 - *Totally Disagree*. Then, the mean and the standard deviation for each variable were calculated based on these options. The results for each variable within every factor are presented in a series of numbered figures that follow. The focus of the analyses is on the mean, as the standard deviation in each case was minimal, as shown in the summary charts.

Regarding Factor 1, *Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance*, the variables refer to positive characteristics students observed in their teachers during class time. The mean and standard deviation obtained for each of these variables appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1 (Factor 1). Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance



5- Totally Agree, 4- Agree, 3- Neutral, 2-Disagree, 1- Totally Disagree

Data in Figure 1 suggest that most student-participants agreed on the fact that their teachers are establishing an appropriate environment for learning, as the mean for every variable tends to be expressed mostly in terms of *agreement* (4). Nevertheless, certain variables may present an opportunity for further study. Analyzing the percentages of students' responses for the factor of Teachers' Performance in Table 2, the researchers note that more than one third of the students did not perceive their teachers attuned to identifying students' strengths and limitations and 28% of respondents *totally disagreed* that their teachers' motivate them to improve. The latter variable registered the highest percentage of disagreement for this factor, as indicated in Table 2.

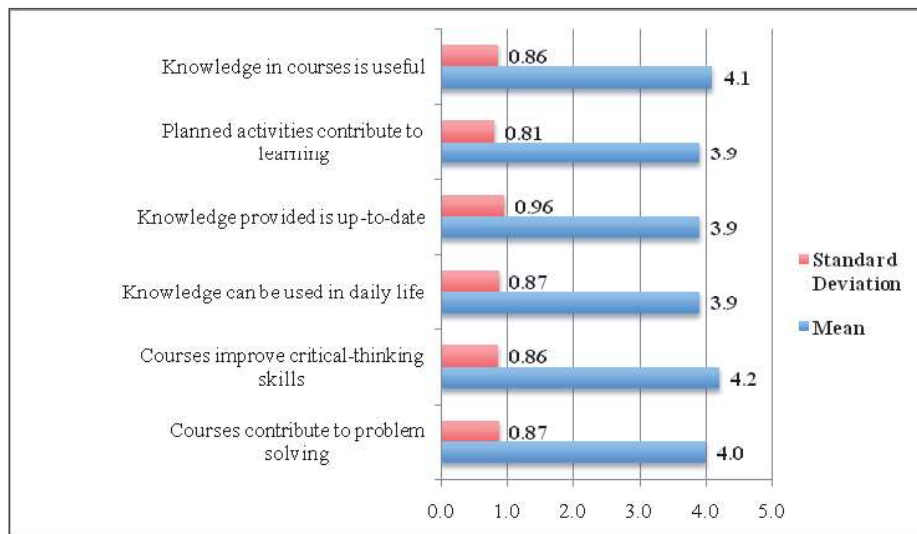
Table 2 (Factor 1). Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Performance

<i>Variable – Teachers...</i>	<i>5-Totally Agree</i>	<i>4-Agree</i>	<i>3-Neutral</i>	<i>2-Disagree</i>	<i>1-Totally Disagree</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Provide feedback on students' participation	16.0%	31.1%	43.4%	5.7%	3.8%	0.96
Motivate students to improve	18.5%	44.4%	28.7%	5.6%	28.0%	0.93
Offer suggestions for improvement	22.2%	46.3%	22.2%	8.3%	9.0%	0.91
Identify students' strengths	6.5%	23.1%	45.4%	17.6%	7.4%	0.99
Identify students' limitations	7.8%	19.6%	49.0%	17.6%	5.9%	0.96
Stimulate critical thinking	24.3%	36.4%	29.0%	9.3%	0.9%	0.96
Have positive expectations of students	13.0%	36.1%	42.6%	7.4%	0.9%	0.85
Explain content clearly	26.2%	42.1%	23.4%	7.5%	0.9%	0.93
Adhere to the syllabus	30.8%	41.1%	23.4%	4.7%	0.0%	0.86
Encourage academic discussion	20.6%	31.8%	44.9%	1.9%	0.9%	0.85
Observe students' performance	13.9%	38.0%	41.7%	5.6%	0.9%	0.83
Are mindful of students' previous knowledge	11.1%	35.2%	32.4%	12.0%	9.3%	1.11

Regarding the second factor, *Students' Perceptions of the Theoretical and Practical Knowledge of the Courses*, the means of the variables (Figure 2) indicate that the students perceived the theoretical and practical knowledge offered in the BA program as appropriate and useful. However, it is important to remember that the

student-participants have been enrolled for only a month and a half in the first term of the program, and this highly positive perception likely relates to the motivation they have at this initial stage, as well as their necessarily brief experience in the program.

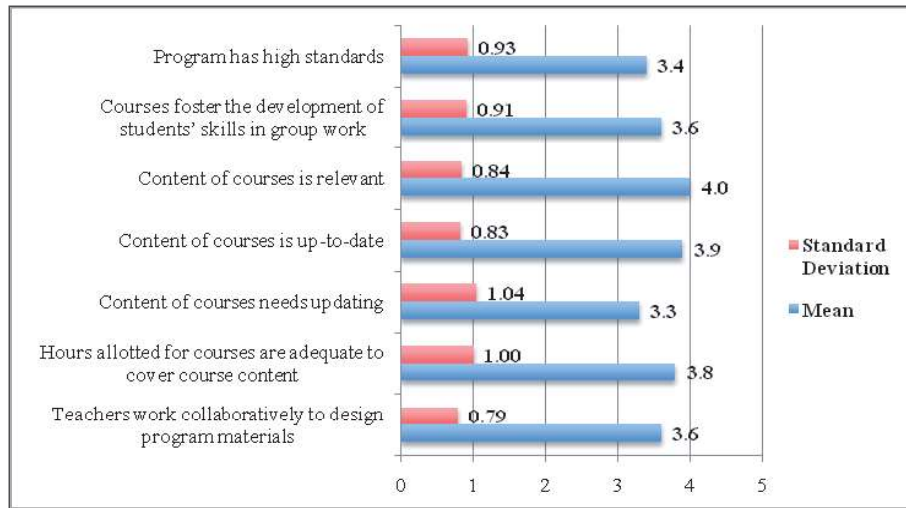
Figure 2 (Factor 2). Students’ Perceptions of the Theoretical and Practical Knowledge of the Courses



5- Totally Agree, 4- Agree, 3- Neutral, 2-Disagree, 1- Totally Disagree

For Factor 3, *Students’ Perceptions of the BA Program in General*, the results are similar, indicating that at this point in their studies, students have positive perceptions of the BA program in general. In Figure 3 the mean for most variables communicated *agreement*. However, one of the variables referred to the students’ experience in the program. Although it is identified in Figure 3 and Table 3 as *program has high standards*, the actual wording in the questionnaire asked students whether, based on their experience in the program, they perceived it as excellent. Since the respondents are in their first semester of the program, they have no previous experience. The mean (3.4) for this variable indicates a rating of *neutral*, suggesting that a considerable number of respondents (42.6%) may have been aware that they cannot yet *have* a meaningful opinion of the program’s excellence.

Figure 3 (Factor 3). Students’ Perceptions of the BA Program in General



5- Totally Agree, 4- Agree, 3- Neutral, 2-Disagree, 1- Totally Disagree

Nevertheless, as Table 3 shows, the majority (57.5%) expressed either combined *agreement* or *disagreement* with the variable. This could suggest that students have a positive perception of the little experience they have had in the program, if they considered this as a possible interpretation of the question; on the other hand, it might only mean that including the variable (question) at this nascent stage of their study was confusing to the respondents.

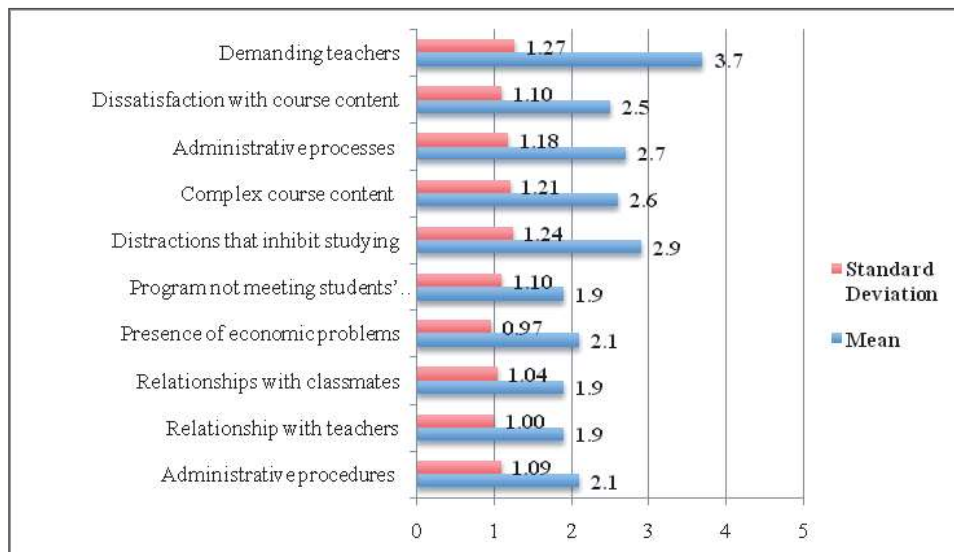
Table 3 (Factor 3). Students’ Perceptions of the BA Program in General

Variable	5-Totally Agree	4-Agree	3-Neutral	2-Disagree	1-Totally Disagree	Standard Deviation
Program has high standards	13.9%	30.6%	42.6%	11.1%	1.9%	0.93
Courses foster the development of students skills in group work	14.8%	42.6%	32.4%	8.3%	1.9%	0.91
Content of course is relevant	28.7%	45.4%	22.2%	1.9%	0.9%	0.84
Content of courses is up-to-date	26.4%	44.3%	26.4%	0.9%	0.9%	0.83
Content of courses needs updating	15.1%	30.2%	34.9%	16.0%	3.8%	1.04
Hours allotted for courses are adequate to cover course content	22.4%	44.9%	20.6%	8.4%	2.8%	1.00
Teachers work collaboratively to design program material	12.3%	38.7%	44.3%	3.8%	0.9%	0.79

Other contradictory data that can be observed in Table 3 include the fact that the great majority of respondents (70.7%) chose one of the *agreement* options for the variable dealing with whether the content of the courses is up-to-date, while 45.3% considered that it is necessary to update course content and topics in the program. Further research would be necessary to determine how students' interpretations of these two variables change over time.

The information collected for Factor 4, *Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to External Factors*, indicates that students did not seem to perceive any of the variables as problematic. The mean for most variables expresses *disagreement*, as can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4 (Factor 4). Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to External Factors



5- Totally Agree, 4- Agree, 3- Neutral, 2-Disagree, 1- Totally Disagree

However, attention should be paid to the variables where the mean is closer to 3, which are also those showing a slightly higher percentage of *agreement*, as can be

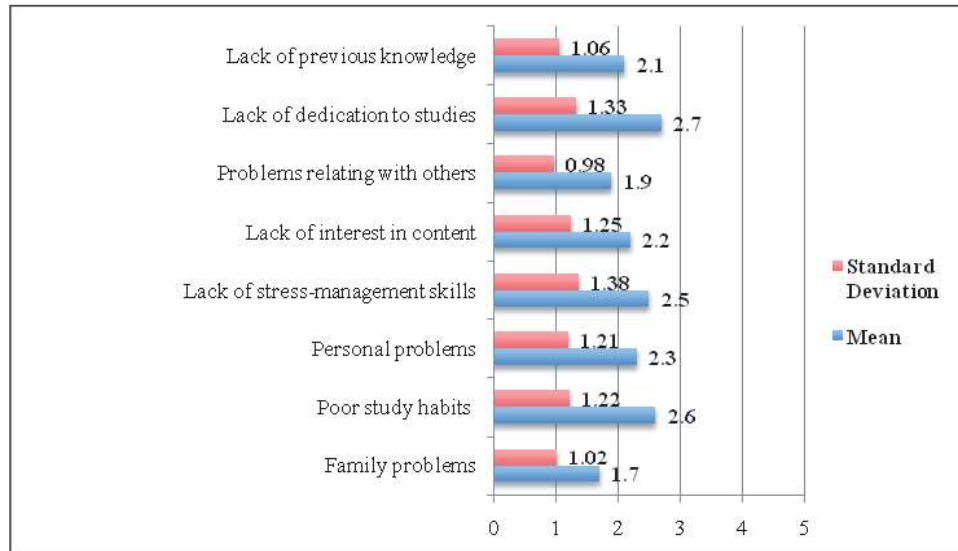
seen in Table 4. Of the four potentially problematic variables, one (*study habits*) is related to the personal characteristics of the students, and another one (*demanding teachers*) deals with how the students perceive the teachers. The remaining two variables (*administrative processes* and *complex course content*) are more closely linked to issues of an institutional nature. Such matters within the purview of the university should be especially monitored throughout the study. Should they contribute to students' academic difficulties, it would be necessary to establish an action plan to address them.

Table 4 (Factor 4). Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to External Factors

<i>Variable</i>	<i>5-Totally Agree</i>	<i>4-Agree</i>	<i>3-Neutral</i>	<i>2-Disagree</i>	<i>1-Totally Disagree</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Demanding teachers	11.1%	12.0%	33.3%	20.4%	23.1%	1.27
Dissatisfaction with course content	3.7%	15.7%	28.7%	30.6%	21.3%	1.10
Administrative processes	7.5%	16.8%	29.9%	27.1%	18.7%	1.18
Complex course content	4.6%	15.7%	30.6%	28.7%	20.4%	1.21
Distractions that inhibit studying	13.0%	18.5%	35.2%	16.7%	16.7%	1.24
Program not meeting students' expectations	4.7%	4.7%	16.8%	29.9%	43.9%	1.10
Presence of economic problems	0.9%	8.3%	24.1%	37.0%	29.6%	0.97
Relationship with classmates	3.7%	2.8%	17.8%	29.9%	45.8%	1.04
Relationship with teachers	2.8%	2.8%	23.4%	30.8%	40.2%	1.00
Administrative procedures	3.7%	6.5%	24.3%	29.0%	36.4%	1.09

In terms of internal factors that might affect students' academic performance (Factor 5), it can be seen in Figure 5 that the variables calling for careful monitoring as potentially problematic are *poor study habits* and *lack of dedication to studies*, which registered means (2.6 and 2.7, respectively) leaning toward *neutral*.

Figure 5 (Factor 5). Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to Personal Factors



These results are consistent with those for the external factors, especially considering the parallel concerns of *poor study habits* and *students being easily distracted while studying*. Noticing the fact that external distractions inhibit their studying and that students' personal characteristics suggest a less-than-enthusiastic dedication to academic priorities and study habits implies that the connection deserves further attention and study.

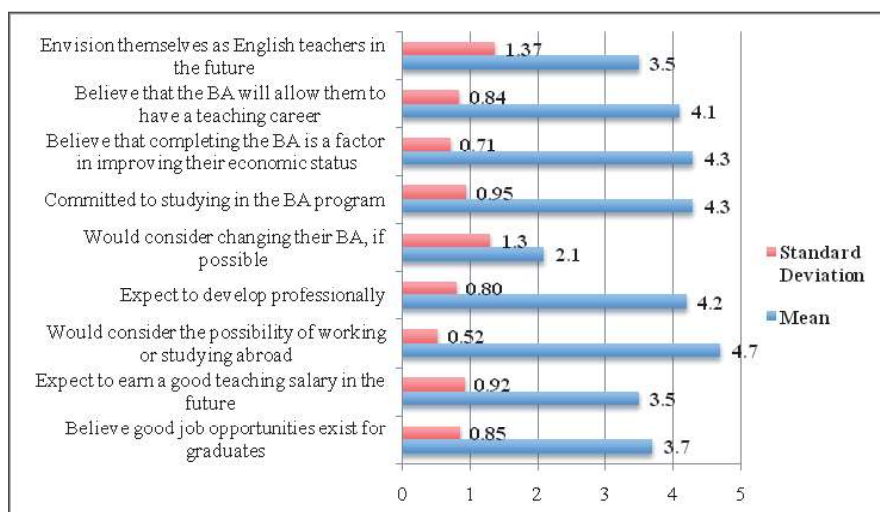
Another variable worth additional scrutiny is *lack of stress-management skills*, a response that while registering a mean of 2.5 also had a combined percentage of *agreement* (27.7%) that was slightly higher than that of other variables, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5 (Factor 5). Students' Perceptions of Academic Difficulties due to Personal Factors

Variable	5-Totally Agree	4-Agree	3-Neutral	2-Disagree	1-Totally Disagree	Standard Deviation
Lack of previous knowledge	1.9%	10.2%	24.1%	29.6%	34.3%	1.06
Lack of dedication to studies	12.0%	16.7%	23.1%	23.1%	25.0%	1.33
Problems relating with others	1.9%	4.6%	18.5%	30.6%	44.4%	0.98
Lack of interest in content	6.5%	11.1%	19.4%	25.0%	38.0%	1.25
Lack of stress-management skills	12.0%	15.7%	22.2%	19.4%	30.6%	1.38
Personal problems	5.6%	13.9%	24.1%	25.0%	31.5%	1.21
Poor study habits	4.7%	25.2%	21.5%	26.2%	22.4%	1.22
Family problems	2.8%	4.6%	12.0%	26.9%	53.7%	1.02

Turning to Factor 6, what students expect to obtain upon completion of their BA studies, the results indicate that respondents have a positive view of the future and of their potential upon graduation, as Figure 6 shows.

Figure 6 (Factor 6). Students' Vocational Beliefs and Expectations



5- Totally Agree, 4- Agree, 3- Neutral, 2-Disagree, 1- Totally Disagree

These positive expectations can apparently be related to the students' decision to study in the English Language BA program, as shown in the variable *committed to studying in the BA program* which obtained a mean of 4.3, signifying *agreement*. This is corroborated by the variable *would consider changing their BA* which had a mean of 2.1, showing *disagreement*. These findings suggest that most students in the 2014 cohort are studying what they want to study, and this may explain why they feel that graduating from the program will provide them with opportunities to become successful professionals.

Table 6 highlights two other variables deserving closer examination. They deal with students' expectations regarding the *improvement of their economic status* when they finish the BA and opportunities for *studying and working abroad*.

Table 6 (Factor 6). Students' Vocational Beliefs and Expectations

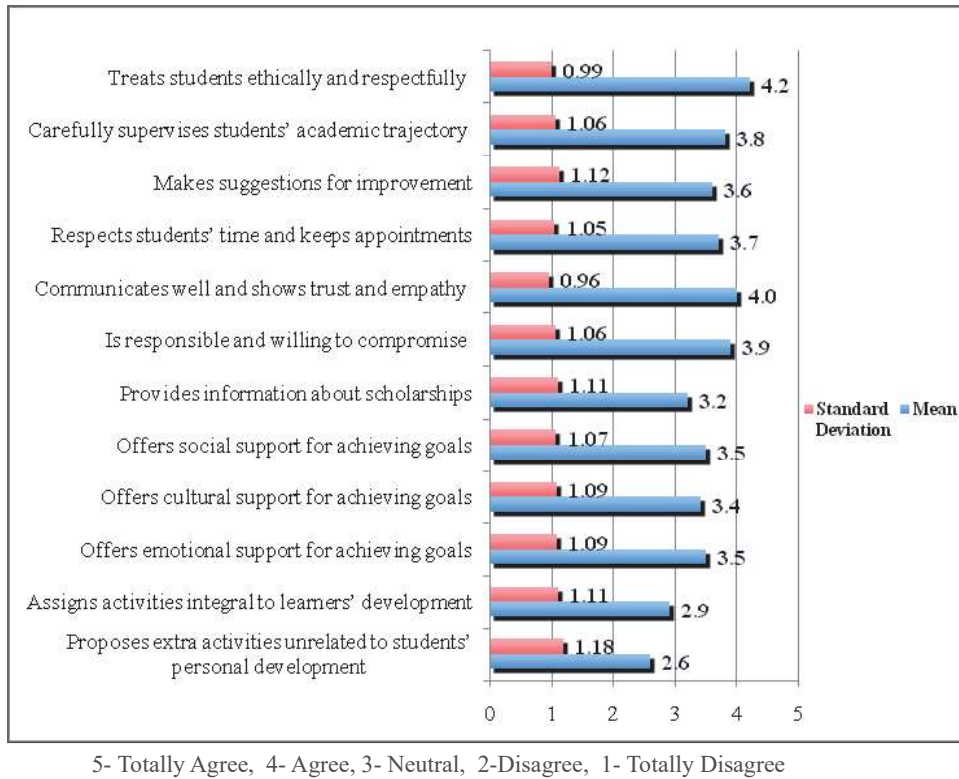
<i>Variable</i>	<i>5-Totally Agree</i>	<i>4-Agree</i>	<i>3-Neutral</i>	<i>2-Disagree</i>	<i>1-Totally Disagree</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Envision themselves as English teachers in the future	31.5%	25.0%	22.2%	7.4%	13.9%	1.37
Believe that the BA will allow them to have a teaching career	38.9%	40.7%	15.7%	4.6%	0.0%	0.84
Believe that completing the BA program is a factor in improving their economic status	44.4%	43.5%	11.1%	0.9%	0.0%	0.71
Committed to studying in the BA program	55.6%	26.9%	12.0%	3.7%	1.9%	0.95
Would consider changing their BA, if possible	8.3%	8.3%	24.1%	13.0%	46.3%	1.3
Expect to develop professionally	47.2%	34.3%	16.7%	1.9%	0.0%	0.80
Would consider the possibility of working or studying abroad	71.0%	26.2%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.52
Expect to earn a good teaching salary in the future	17.6%	26.9%	47.2%	6.5%	1.9%	0.92
Believe good job opportunities exist for graduates	17.6%	44.4%	33.3%	2.8%	1.9%	0.85

The data summarized here have implications regarding possible measures the University of Veracruz could take in order to meet students' expectations, including providing additional information and avenues for obtaining scholarships and

fostering professional-development practices, outreach programs, and other initiatives related to increasing job opportunities for graduates.

In the final factor addressed in Section B of the research questionnaire, students were asked for their impressions of the tutorial experience at UV. Their perceptions tended to be positive, as can be seen in Figure 7. Their opinions ranged from *neutral* to *totally agree* for all the variables.

Figure 7 (Factor 7). Students' Perceptions of the Tutorial Experience



Concurrent with earlier findings in this chapter suggesting not all the factors in the research instrument are relevant for new students, it should be noted that the student-participants in this study as new enrollees in the BA program have very little experience with tutorials. Moreover, at this initial phase of their academic trajectories,

UV's policies favor first-year students in terms of tutorial activity. Thus, students' positive perceptions may be the result of these two conditions.

For the final portion of the questionnaire, Section C, student-participants were asked an open-ended question regarding their experience in the BA program. Their responses confirm many of the findings in Section B—that the 2014 cohort has, in general, an initial positive perception of the program. A great majority of students (72.2%) expressed feeling *rather well, quite well, comfortable* or *satisfied*, and even *happy* with their experience. Nine students' comments referred to teachers; three remarks addressed classmates; seven opinions alluded to courses; and one comment was an observation of the learning environment in the program. Excerpts presented below were taken from students' responses and are used to illustrate some of the realities and concerns students mentioned. In order to maintain their anonymity, student numbers have been assigned to the quoted excerpts in the text.

Students' favorable comments dealt with their expectations of the program itself. Some opinions were expressed in a general way, such as *con expectativas positivas* ("with positive expectations," S17); *superó mis expectativas* ("exceeded my expectations," S76); and *con muchas expectativas* ("with great expectations," S98). Other remarks in relation to the program itself registered quieter approval.

S2 — *esta carrera sí cumple con mis expectativas*
—this program complies with my expectations

S31 — *bien, con lo que esperaba de esta carrera*
—concurrs with what I expected from the program

S44 — *muy satisfecho con esta carrera*
—very satisfied with this program

Some students stated opinions in terms of their learning. A sample of these responses follows.

S21 — *estoy aprendiendo de manera satisfactoria*
—I am learning satisfactorily

S33 — *muy satisfecho con lo que hasta ahora he aprendido*
—very satisfied with what I have learned so far

S41 — *siento que estoy progresando*
—I feel that I'm making progress

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- S63 —*lo que he aprendido ha cubierto mis expectativas hasta ahora*
—what I've learned has met my expectations so far
- S103 —*estoy muy satisfecha con lo visto y aprendido*
—I'm very satisfied with what we've seen and learned
- S108 —*muy satisfecho con lo que he aprendido*
—very satisfied with what I have learned

Notwithstanding the affirmative responses, Section C also generated negative comments. Seven responses were related to *feeling stressed* due to the courses being studied; one comment referred to a specific subject taught in Spanish; and one student wrote that this BA degree was not what he/she had wanted to study. There were also unenthusiastic comments regarding the students' own levels of English or their perceptions of their levels. Five respondents felt their English level was too low which led to a feeling of insecurity; on the other hand, two students felt they could have taken more advanced courses. Additionally, two students expressed uncertainty about studying in this program: one described feeling *confused* because of administration procedures, and the other mentioned simply feeling *bad*.

Other unfavorable comments made reference to time issues, such as *falta de ... tiempo* ("lack of time," S8). Additional responses related to time follow.

- S22 —*las clases y el periodo son muy cortos*
—the classes and my class periods are very short
- S24 —*lo único que me incomoda es el horario... salimos muy noche*
—the only thing that bothers me is the schedule; we leave late at night
- S99 —*por el trabajo se me complica un poco estudiar más*
—since I work it's complicated for me to study more

Some respondents shared thoughts about the challenge of adapting to the reality of being a university student.

- S13 —*es extraño porque es algo nuevo*
—it's strange because it's something new
- S65 —*me fue difícil el cambio de ciudad y el estar solo*
—it was hard to change city and to be alone

S91 —*batallé para acostumbrarme*
—I struggled to get used to [the new situation]

S104 —*me siento un tanto desorientada, es cuestión de acostumbrarse supongo*
—I feel somewhat disoriented; it's a matter of getting used to [things.] I guess

An analysis of this last group of responses suggests that they reflect students' personal paths to adjusting to a new chapter in their lives and are not related to the BA program itself.

Reviewing students' comments in Section C, one could say that most of the 2014 cohort have a positive perception of the program thus far, although it is a bit too early for them to actually have a firm opinion about it, as one of the student-participants noted: *Pues apenas llevo menos de tres meses así que ni siquiera sé que tan bien me adecue el programa ni tengo experiencia suficiente* ("Well, I have [been here] less than three months, so I don't even know how well I fit in the program; I don't have enough experience yet." S105). At the same time, the respondents' feelings and observations point to areas in which UV could initiate steps to positively affect students' well-being. These include establishing programs in which senior students help first-year students adapt more easily to the university environment, being proactive by informing students well in advance of the dates of exams that allow them to bypass a beginner course, and promoting stress-management dialogues between tutors and new enrollees.

Conclusions

The initial stage of this academic-trajectory study has allowed us to identify key features of the 2014 cohort in the English Language BA at the University of Veracruz. We learned that this cohort consists mainly of single, full-time, and what might be called *typical* students, the majority of whom entered the program with high school GPAs of between 8.0 and 8.9. The students are economically dependent on their parents, have a linear school trajectory thus far, are convinced of their decision to study in this BA program, and have high expectations of the possibilities that may accrue from completing it. In a previous study of students' perceptions of this BA program (Narvárez, Estrada, and Núñez, 2015), three different cohorts reported an increasingly positive perception as they advanced through their studies. In view of these general findings, it would be expected that most of the student-participants completed the program successfully.

Nevertheless, over the years of its existence, dropout rates have been high and graduation rates low in the BA program. Factors possibly influencing this behavior could be that most students, as we teacher-researchers discovered in our research, are from middle-class backgrounds and have moved from their hometowns to study in the BA program. This reality could imply that students' parents make great financial efforts and/or sacrifices to support their children's stay in a different city. Moreover, for students, the separation from home might present an emotional shock that subsequently affects their academic trajectory. Therefore, as the longitudinal study progresses, it is important to keep in mind the economic sacrifices and the effects of living away from home to determine the impact of these factors on students as they proceed along their academic paths at UV.

Another piece of data that caught our attention was the fact that most student-participants seem to acknowledge limitations in their study habits and recognize that this factor can affect their academic performance. There is also a latent potentially troublesome situation related to their reported lack of stress-management skills. Both aspects need to be carefully addressed for their possible negative impact on student trajectories in the future. The data present an opportunity to conduct further research on whether these self-identified limitations continue, diminish, or disappear as students proceed through the program.

Yet another aspect worthy of additional research—a remarkable case study in itself—relates to the gifted student who is the first under-age student ever to enroll in LLI. Another area ripe for further study would be the trajectories of students who are differently abled, especially now that UV has established a new department whose intention is to raise the university community's consciousness of diversity within the school population.

What we can conclude from the data collected in this initial stage of the study is that we now have in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the 2014 cohort of first-year students. With this information, we and other academic *performers* (administrators and teachers alike) can work on more solid ground vis-à-vis meeting students' needs rather than making academic decisions based on assumptions. The information obtained has clearly indicated what future research paths seem appropriate, now that certain variables which may have an impact on students' trajectories have been identified. This poses an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity rests in following this cohort closely to determine to what extent the identified variables have an impact and at which point in students' trajectories their influence becomes apparent. The challenge lies in resolving to take the necessary subsequent steps, as we realize that longitudinal studies require a long-term commitment.

Finally, we recognize that the data presented here may be useful for teachers, teacher trainers, and administrative and institutional authorities who rely on substantive input to make more informed decisions affecting students' academic trajectories and their life-changing experiences in higher education.

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