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## Spanish Mission

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## Getting Ahead



**LEARNING THE LANGUAGE:** Ana Trisan, center, teaches with flashcards at Spanish Blackbelt, a local language program.

# The Spanish Fly

A wealth of language programs make learning mas facil

*¿Ustedes hablan español?* If you don't speak Spanish, you may soon feel left behind. One of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the U.S., Hispanics currently make up 15 percent of the population. In Maryland, Virginia and D.C., there

are about 7 million people who primarily speak Spanish at home, and in some neighborhoods, such as the District's Mount Pleasant and some areas of Northern Virginia and Montgomery County, the language is almost, well, *nesesito*.

With so much Hispanic culture around, it's no wonder that many people are eager to get past *por favor* and *gracias*. Fortunately,

there are plenty of classes in the area to help.

Betsy Sanford first started learning Spanish to prepare for a family trip to Spain. That was back in 2001, and she's been taking classes ever since, first with Montgomery County Adult Education and now with Montgomery County Community College. "I realize that I don't have fluency, yet," she said, "but I understand more and

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more each semester."

Sanford has found Spanish to be particularly helpful in her work as a math specialist at an elementary school in Fairfax County. She now will try to explain concepts in Spanish to Hispanic students and can better relate to students who hesitate to participate in class because they're embarrassed about their English skills.

People interested in taking a Spanish class may want to think about how they learn best. Do you prefer a traditional classroom with other students? Or individualized tutoring?

For those who want a little more personalized instruction, Spanish Black Belt, started three-and-a-half years ago by Nicolas Canales, sets people up with tutors for one-on-one or small-group sessions. Students get to pick their class schedules (up to 16 hours a week) and classrooms (home, office, café). Canales said his students "want to practice and interact in a very informal, social, and fun environment," said Canales. Spanish Black Belt also has one of the coolest ways to designate fluency levels: Using the terminology of karate, students work up from white belt to black belt.

There are many options for those who want to sign up for more traditional classes. The University of Maryland University College, Northern Virginia Community College and other area schools offer classes ranging from beginner Spanish to advanced speaking and literature courses. Many of the classes are at night and geared toward working adults. Students often choose between credit and

non-credit courses; non-credit courses are usually shorter and less intense.

At NVCC, courses are designed for various types of professionals. There's a Spanish class for health-care workers, one for law enforcement and another for those involved in business. There's even a class, "Spanish for Heritage Speakers,"

**“When learning English, I was trying to rationalize why ‘Kansas’ is pronounced Kansas, and Arkansas is not pronounced like Kansas.”**

**ELENA TSCHERNY**  
GRADUATE SCHOOL, USDA

for students who picked up some Spanish from their parents or grandparents but want to learn more.

"They have the language they speak at home, which may be related to clothes and food, but it is not an academic language," said Carmen Figueroa, who teaches the class. "They know how to speak and listen but not how to read and write, and their vocabulary is limited."

Like many schools, the Graduate School, USDA offers several types of introductory Spanish courses including traditional Spanish I and Conversational Spanish. The conversational class, with its focus on speaking and listening, is "for the student who learns through the ear," said Klaus Luthardt, who manages

the foreign-language program for the Graduate School. "The introductory, that's for the student who learns more through the eye and through the concepts," he said.

Instructor Elena Tscherny says that she emphasizes culture as well as language in her classes at the Graduate School, USDA. In addition to listening to Spanish radio programs and being taught almost exclusively in the language, students also read a Spanish play. Near the end of the session, the class goes out together for a Hispanic dinner and then watches the play performed live.

Many students are motivated by the increasing presence of Spanish in their lives — either through work, friends or dating someone who is Hispanic. For many professionals who are used to being experts in their fields, starting from square one can be frustrating. Words roll awkwardly off the tongue, and basic vocabulary requires rote memorization. Tscherny, who emigrated here from Peru in 1974, remembers seeing it from the flip side. "When learning English, I was trying to rationalize why 'Kansas' is pronounced Kansas, and Arkansas is not pronounced like Kansas."

To be sure, it can take time to become proficient in a foreign language. While Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky D-Ill., has taken Spanish classes for the past five years, she only recently worked up the nerve to give a speech in Spanish. "I wanted to try, and the audience appreciated it," she said. Next, she's going to try to give a full interview in the language. Good luck, or should we say, *Buenos suerte*. **BETSY GUERNA**

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