

Does the study of ASL fulfill the U of O foreign language requirement?

Prepared by UO foreign language faculty (April, 2002)

1. There is no question that ASL is a visual gesture language of great complexity, with a distinctive and challenging grammar. While teaching it at the U of O should be fostered, it is legitimate to question whether it should count toward the language requirement at the U of O. What we call in shorthand "the language requirement" is actually the *foreign* language requirement. In other words, the basic criterion for fulfillment of that requirement is foreignness from American English and the cultures it articulates and emerges out of. ASL, as a form of communication *specific* to the U.S. (and not, like Spanish, merely spoken *also* in the U.S.), does not meet the basic international criterion of the foreign language requirement.
2. ASL is used by over 500,000 deaf people in the United States today who share a common culture. However, the culture which they share remains an American culture, that is, a dimension or subculture of the American matrix in which it is used and developed. The culture of ASL is not coextensive with that of the other national sign languages, since none of these exists in isolation from their national / cultural matrix. For that reason, study of the culture associated with ASL could satisfy the Multicultural requirement in categories A (American Cultures) or B (Identity, Pluralism, and Tolerance), but not in C (International Cultures)--and it should not satisfy the UO foreign language requirement.
3. The very welcome proliferation of professional groups and projects across the US devoted to the production of different forms of Deaf culture, ranging from Deaf theater (National Theater of the Deaf, Cleveland Signstage Theatre, Chicago Sign on Stage) to Deaf poetry (Deaf Poets Society) and film (Cinema for the Deaf) testifies to an emerging culture no less distinctive for being emergent, a fact that is already recognized by many anthropologists and ethnographers. Yet as in paragraph #2, the proliferation of Deaf professional groups and projects, like that of analogous groups representing and promoting African American, Jewish American, or Chinese American experience, in no way proves the autonomy of Deaf culture (or African American, Jewish American, or Asian American) from American culture at large. It would be difficult to make a case for the study of any of these cultures as distinctively foreign cultures, when they exist within, contribute to, and draw on the surrounding American culture.
4. The study of a foreign language up to the level of 203 entails a considerable immersion in its culture. That culture is not defined in terms of *sound*, but rather in terms of undeniably alien ways of understanding (not merely articulating or perceiving) the world around us, global and local history, and one's place in it. In addition, the cultures of those languages which the UO recognizes as fulfilling its requirement have massive bodies of cultural production which date back at least a millennium, and often several millennia. While one may debate whether these organically-developed cultures and languages differ qualitatively from ASL, there is in our view no doubt that the former represent exponentially more substantial, and substantially *foreign*, cultural and linguistic corpora than ASL.
5. While ASL already satisfies UO's entrance requirement of two years of language study at the high school level, what the UO requires from its entering students, and what it requires of its students to earn a degree, are two legitimately different categories.

DRAFT – CURRENTLY BEING REVISED 4/13/02

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6. That the Oregon State Legislature has permitted the State Board of Higher Education to recognize ASL as satisfying any second language elective requirement is not the same as dictating that all colleges and universities shall do so. Each institution maintains a degree of freedom in designing its curriculum and assigning its resources. We note that the wording of the law touching ASL refers to sufficient enrollment to make a program economically viable; the UO is not meeting the enrollment demands for such languages as Spanish because funding for staff is not available. It is unfortunately not *demand* that makes courses and programs economically viable.

7. More than eighty universities (including Stanford and Yale) across the US that currently accept ASL as a foreign language; that leaves approximately 2400 that do not. Unlike Stanford and Yale, for example, the UO must field its curriculum in a constant state of budgetary uncertainty and constriction. When the need for many other, undeniably foreign, languages – such as Arabic, most notably – is unmet for reasons of fiscal exigency, it is irresponsible to commit resources to a language about whose place in the foreign language curriculum no consensus exists, but rather considerable dispute. (From the 2001-2002 UO Catalog it seems that ASL courses run only as a three-term sequence; the cost of adding a second year to ALS would thus be considerable.)

8. The burden of proving that there is a substantial cultural component of ASL courses lies with the proponents of its acceptance for the foreign language requirement. A sustained comparison of the syllabi of CDS 168/169/170 and (for example) GER 101/102/103 and 201/202/203 by a qualified group of personnel would help clarify the exact cultural content of the ASL courses taught at the UO.

9. The committee notes that this issue has been dealt with decisively and conscientiously in 1994 and 1997, and it is of dubious use to reconsider it every few years.