

Growing interest in American sign language at UC San Diego may reflect national trend

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GROWING INTEREST IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE AT UC SAN DIEGO MAY REFLECT NATIONAL TREND

Enrolling in a foreign or second language is becoming increasingly popular at the University of California, San Diego, as jobs in the global marketplace continue to put a premium on foreign language skills and multiculturalism. At UCSD and many other universities, however, students with an interest in sampling diversity and multiculturalism are perhaps as likely to enroll in American Sign Language (ASL) as they are to take a foreign language such as Japanese, Italian, or German.

After Spanish and French, the most popular language offered through UCSD's Linguistics Language Program is not a foreign language, but ASL. Furthermore, the interest in ASL, which has been offered at UCSD for only two years now, appears to be on the rise, reflecting what many language specialists believe may be a national trend. At UCSD, the enrollment numbers for this fall show a 25% increase in students enrolling in Spanish, a 20% increase in French, a 12% increase in Italian, a 10% increase in German, and a 40% increase in ASL!

According to Professor Sanford Schane, director of UCSD's Linguistics Language Program, ASL is now offered at many but not all universities, and enrollment figures across the nation appear to be on the upswing, as more and more students are now able to take ASL courses to fulfill foreign language requirements. UCSD offers ASL in addition to courses in deaf culture and education.

"ASL enrollments tend to be fairly robust in those colleges that offer it," said Schane. "As to why it is so popular here, I think there are several reasons. Some students get interested in it as a result of taking a course in deaf culture, others are looking for careers in interpreting or have other career reasons for learning ASL, and some are interested in learning a language that uses a different modality. Others are just plain curious."

There are numerous career paths associated with learning ASL, including teaching, child care, interpreting, mental health, social services, government services, and research. It has also become an extremely useful language to know in the workplace. Professionals and service people who sign are now commonly employed in restaurants, hotels, department stores, doctors' offices and a variety of public places.

Although in the past there was dissension in the linguistics community as to whether or not ASL was a bona fide language, ASL is now widely accepted by most linguists as a full-fledged language with its own distinctive grammar, vocabulary, and culture. What ASL is not, according to linguists who study sign languages, is a signed version of spoken English or miming, but a gestural language whose rules are similar to those of spoken languages.

UCSD's strength in ASL, deaf culture, and literature offerings is due to the fact that the university has several of the nation's top scholars on deaf culture and ASL in its midst, including Linguistics Professor David Perlmutter, Communication Professor Carol Padden, and Tom Humphries, also of the Communication Department.

Perlmutter is a sign language researcher whose attraction to ASL stems from his interest in linguistic universals. According to Perlmutter, sign languages shed light on what all languages have in common. He teaches a course on sign language and its culture, which is popular among students who take it to satisfy the cultural diversity requirement.

Padden and Humphries, who are both deaf, are the authors of *Deaf in America: Voices From a Culture* (Harvard, 1988). Padden, who specializes in deafness and the cultural aspects of child development issues, teaches courses in communication and deaf culture. Humphries also teaches courses on language, culture, and education through the UCSD Teacher Education Program. Padden and Humphries, who are married, also coauthored a major textbook on ASL in 1980.

In addition, some of the most important research on sign language was done at UCSD by Linguistics Professor Emeritus Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi, an adjunct professor of psychology at UCSD and a researcher at the Salk Institute. In their 1979 book, *The Signs of Language*, Klima and Bellugi contributed to the growing body of evidence that ASL is not a form of pidgin English with the hands, but a complex language with its own unique grammatical structure.

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