

Students fill Russian classes Soviet reforms boost attendance

By Joseph Kidd
Emerald Contributor

Soviet reforms have not yet filled empty store shelves in the Soviet Union, but they have packed full Russian language classes at the University, according to a recent survey of Russian students.

In a poll this term of the Russian department's largest ever first-year Russian language section, 48 percent of the students responded positively to the question "Have recent changes in the Soviet Bloc affected your decision to study Russian?"

While the University's overall attendance has increased only by eight percent since 1985, attendance in first-year Russian language classes has climbed 82 percent.

But the first-year section increase is only part of the overall picture. All Russian classes are growing dramatically, said Albert Leong, Russian department head.

"We have the largest second-year section ever this year because last year's first-year students are continuing on," Leong said. "We have the biggest third-year section for the same reason. And conceivably, next year we'll have the biggest fourth-year section in the department's history."

Over the same four-year period, second-year class attendance tripled, and third-year attendance jumped 36 percent.

Enrollment totals are not the only sign of Russian's increasing popularity, said Martha Sherwood-Pike, the department's secretary. Responding to telephone calls from the community has taken up an increasing amount of her time.

"A few years ago we only got a few calls a week," Sherwood-Pike said. "Now we're getting so many calls each day that I've started keeping a ledger."

Recent inquiries ranged from an author needing advice on Russian names for characters in a manuscript, to local businesses needing translators for correspondence about joint ventures with Soviet firms.

The increasing interest in Russian is not limited to this University. Other West Coast universities have reported swelling Russian classes.

Slightly less than the University's 82 percent increase, the University of Washington reported a 79 percent rise in attendance in first-year Russian classes over the last four years. The university has capped off class enrollment at a total of 160 students each year for the last three years due to a lack of faculty.

Both the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Arizona cited increases of 65 percent for the same period. Brigham Young University reported a 71 percent rise.

As for why students are choosing to study Russian, first-year student's responses to a questionnaire circulated for the purpose of this article were varied. Although many cited the recent East bloc changes, other students listed personal interests, career goals and technical reasons.

One student listed "the fact that a lot of the relevant literature in the inorganic chemistry

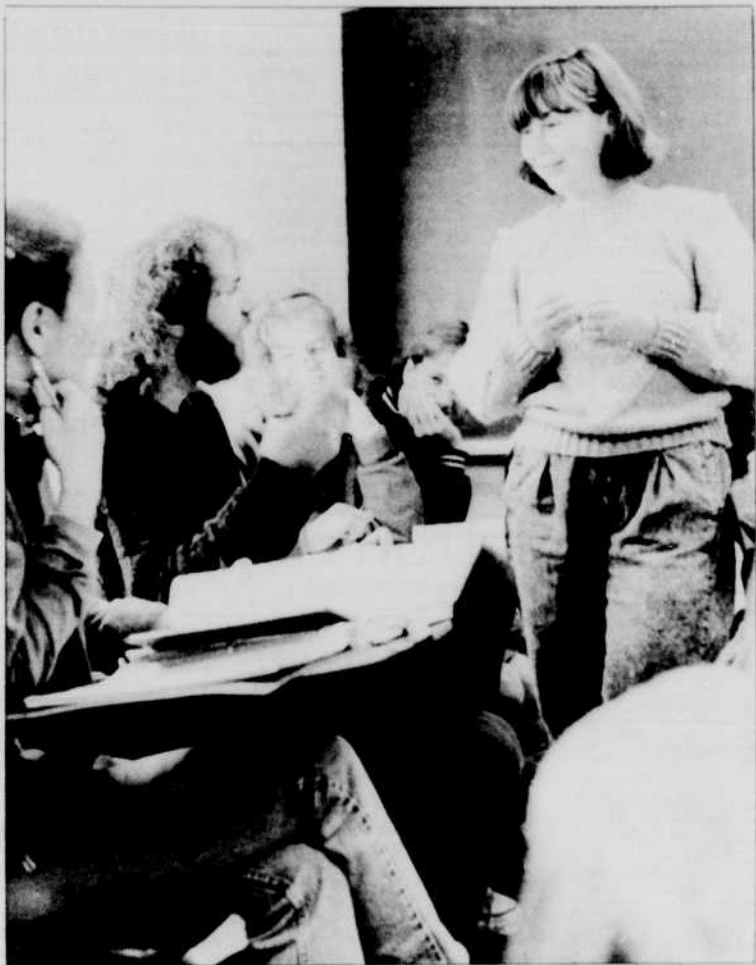


Photo by Joseph Kidd

Soviet exchange instructor Marina Lukanova teaches a second-year Russian language course at the University.

field is in Russian, and translations are hard to come by." Another student wrote, "I feel the Soviet Union's changes will directly affect our generation ... I must learn as much as I can about their world."

This is not the first time world events have influenced student's choices, Leong said. "I myself took part in the earlier boom in Russian after Sputnik," he said, referring to the 10-mission Soviet satellite program that began the Space Age in 1957.

More career possibilities as a result of recent Soviet reforms also draw more students, he said. "There's a job at the end of the line — an interesting job with opportunities for travel."

Leong also believes that increasing international trade requires more people to study foreign languages. "People have had to learn Japanese in order to understand business contracts and even to negotiate. If you can't deal in another language, you're at a great disadvantage," he said.

The quality of the department's program is another reason students at the University choose Russian, Leong said. "One of the calling cards of our program is that we are the only school in the state that, year after year, brings in experienced, dedicated and sometimes charismatic Soviet teachers," he said, referring to the department's exchange program with the Soviet Union.

Changes within the Russian department itself also account for the influx of students, he said. The Russian department gained departmental status in 1985. Because of that, "we gained greater visibility," he said. "We were then able to develop a better program."

The department has so far been able to accommodate the influx. With four graduate teaching fellows (two more than the department had two years ago), four faculty members and a Soviet exchange

teacher, the department has barely been able to handle the increase, Leong said.

"The pressure is building up, but we don't have the faculty resources," he said. "They are strained to the limit as it is."

The department has lobbied for a fifth faculty position for the last three years, but the requests have been denied.

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