

Group fights to save sign classes

By Laurie Kilbourn
Emerald Contributor

American sign language classes will be cut next year unless a newly formed student group can change some decision makers' minds.

ASL Advocates are students concerned about the deaf community who are working to keep sign language classes currently offered to University students through the speech pathology and audiology department.

On March 6 the ASL Advocates presented a petition to University Provost Norman Wessells signed by more than 500 students requesting support of ASL classes, said Carolyn Remmers, a sign language lab teaching assistant and president of ASL Advocates.

Remmers said besides collecting signatures, the group is also collecting letters.

"We've already started collecting letters written by top members of the community," Remmers said. "We're going to be out there showing our support for ASL and answering every question we can. We're trying to be as visible as possible."

"Although ASL is primarily used by members of the deaf community, it must also be taught to people who interact with people who are hearing impaired," said Catherine Inocencio, member ASL Advocates.

"American sign language is a complex language in its own right, using facial expressions, gestures and formal signs to convey messages, using its own structure, grammar and syntax," said Iris Peters, who teaches sign language at the University.

The structure of ASL is different from standard language, Peters said. For example, a hearing person might say, "Last night at 7 p.m., I went shopping. Everything was really expensive. By the time I was done, I didn't have any money left."

In ASL that sentence becomes, "Past night, time seven, store me go-to food (there) expensive, buy-finish broke, money left not," Peters said.

Sign language classes are very difficult to enroll in because of their popularity.

"Fall term's registration was a madhouse," Peters said. "The classes were full by 9:30 on the first day, and the waiting list had over 150 people on it by the end of the day."

"In the nine years I've been teaching here, classes have been filled, and I've always had a long waiting list," she said. "Before this year, I've taught four classes each year — two beginning, one intermediate and one advanced. I taught about 110 students each term, and at one point, two of us were teaching sign classes."

According to these numbers, Peters has taught sign language to approximately 3,000 students.

According to a 1974 report from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, an estimated 13 million Americans are hearing impaired; 25,000 people in southern Oregon have impairments ranging from moderate hearing loss to profound deafness.

"Because hearing-impaired people are becoming more mainstreamed, both in school and in work settings, people are going to be coming in contact with more deaf people," said Kalindi Devi-Dasi, a member of ASL Advocates. "Doctors, teachers, lawyers, social service agencies, right down to bus drivers, all will have contact with people who are hearing impaired." Devi-Dasi described the need for sign language skills as "absolutely imperative."

Sign language classes are being phased out because the speech pathology and audiology department decided to spend more money on their graduate program, said Ned Christiansen, speech pathology and audiology department head.

Christiansen explained that sign language classes were being cut to enable the department to offer other classes and decrease student-teacher ratios, thus qualifying the master's degree program for certification.

"Accreditation of our master's program has always been optional, but it won't be that



Photo by David Morgan

Shawna Holloway, sign student.

way in a few years," he said. "We want our students to be certifiable at a national level."

Instead of teaching sign language, the department will offer one lecture class on sign language, he said.

"This way, our students will get what they need," Christiansen said. "They don't have to come out of here top-notch signers, but (sign language is)

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By GARY LARSON



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