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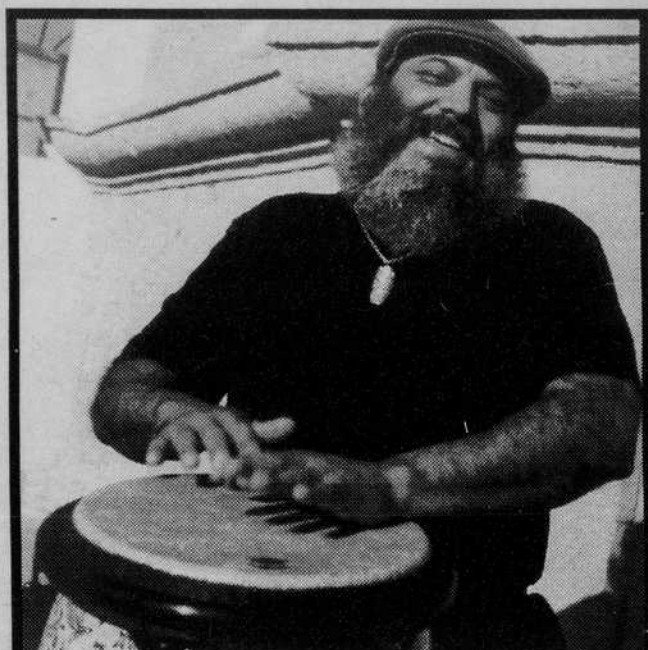
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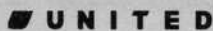


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ASL

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last year, he said, the issue was scheduled for discussion — but as of now no time or date has been set for that meeting.

Gerdes believes now is the time for that discussion to take place.

"There's been some significant changes since the 1997 discussion," she said, including the law on which Evangelista based his petition.

Another new development is an apparently contradictory change in the University's admission's requirements — as of 1998, incoming students can use ASL credit to fulfill the high school foreign language requirement.

Despite these new developments, Gerdes said she believes the most important factor in the council's decision may be whether members are convinced that ASL is a individual language associated with a unique culture.

That didn't happen at the 1994 discussion, former council member and biology professor Alan Dickman said. He said while he supported the motion, the majority of the council did not.

"The big issue was: 'Is there really a culture associated with sign language?'" he said. By the end of the discussion, he said, most council members agreed that ASL was a individual language separate from English.

But members did not reach a consensus that the "deaf culture" often discussed in relation to ASL possessed enough unique literary, historical and artistic markers to qualify it as a truly separate culture, he said.

Michael Hibbard, a professor in the planning, public policy and management department, said he felt that way when he sat on the board.

"I have no doubt that ASL is a

different language, with its own grammar and syntax," he said. "But I think the purpose of the foreign language requirement goes beyond that."

The controversy over the foreign language requirement may lie in the wording, said University Sign Language Instructor Johanna Larson-Muhr.

"I think that what's happening is that the foreign language requirement is mislabeled," she said. "What we're talking about is a second language requirement."

For example, she said, at many universities, Navajo — a language spoken only in the United States — is offered to fulfill that requirement. She also points to the growing number of Americans who speak Spanish, even though that language is also considered "foreign" under the University guidelines.

Because ASL is relatively new — it was not formally recognized as a language until 1965 — people often do not understand that it is a separate language associated with an individual culture, she said.

"It's been proven that ASL has linguistic integrity," she said. "In fact, it has no roots in English at all."

Evangelista, who began his sign language studies in Larson-Muhr's class, said he has learned more from her class than just the language. From hearing her stories of growing up with two deaf parents, he said he has also learned to appreciate the deaf culture. It is a culture that he says has its own history, folklore and traditions.

"The deaf culture is so rich and diverse in tradition and culture that to say it is not a culture ... is not looking at the larger picture," he said.

But while the debate over the merit of ASL culture may not be resolved anytime soon, if Evangelista has his way, the issue could be decided based on the existing law alone.

In 1994, the Undergraduate Council decided the foreign language requirement must:

allow students to gain linguistic skills

make students familiar with other cultures that have ancient and distinct histories

provide intellectual discipline and the challenge of learning a foreign language

The council decided:

The deaf community is a subculture of American culture, rather than a culture foreign from that of the United States in general.

If all available languages were placed on a spectrum, most other languages would receive a higher priority [over ASL].

Dissenting opinion of the council:

ASL clearly provides linguistic skills.

While slightly weaker in its cultural component than standard languages, ASL has enough cultural integrity to carry it to a two-year limit.

ASL has rigorous intellectual content equivalent to other languages.

Source: Feb. 3, 1994, Council minutes

Before writing his petition, he consulted Sandra Gish, the ASL program coordinator at Western Oregon University, for help writing his request. Her advice to him was straightforward, he said: Tell the committee he was requesting that the University allow him to complete the degree requirements as mandated by law and leave at that.

And when it comes down to it, Evangelista said, that is what he plans to do.

"I'm just respectfully asking that the University comply with the state law," he said.

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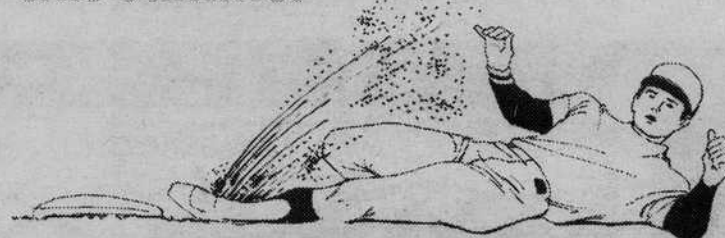
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