

Annual Program Review

ASL Instructional Space Request

September 23, 2013

Request: An additional dedicated classroom for ASL instruction

Current best practices in second language instruction dictate that students are immersed in the target language (TL). This means that instruction is undertaken in sign language and this mandates that all individuals in the room, students and instructor, have simultaneous, line-of-sight, visual contact with one another. As a result, in order to effectively communicate with students in the TL, ASL instructors with classes of 30 students require very large classrooms. At the time of the 2013 ASL Program Review Annual Update, the ASL Program has only one dedicated classroom in which classes are customarily scheduled. This presents a number of problems ranging from scheduling efficiency to instructional effectiveness.

During the 2012/2013 year, the ASL Program offered 32 sections of ASL courses, 16 sections each semester. With our unit-loads and the constraints of time blocks, we can house only 8 sections in our one dedicated room, LA115. As a result, each semester the department chair spends an inordinate amount of time bargaining with other chairs to find rooms that are suitable to ASL instruction. The resulting schedule is heavily weighted in the afternoon and evening with only four or five sections offered in the morning hours. Rather than a morning/afternoon/evening schedule of 40/30/30, ASL finds itself scheduling 20/50/30. It has also resulted in our instructors roaming the halls like nomads, pushing computer carts with frayed wires trailing behind them. These instructors have to set up equipment, hope vainly that the internet will work one more time, and move 30 or more chairs into a suitable seating pattern for visual instruction in the TL. Once the computer cart is set up to project the essential visual aids of instruction, the cart itself prevents some students from seeing the instructor. Similarly, when called on to sign an answer or engage in a spontaneous conversation, students are not mutually visible to each other. If instructors attempt to use a in-room cart with a flat-screen TV, images and text are not sufficiently large enough to be visible to students sitting against the back wall.

Because ASL is a visual-spatial language with no written form, we rely almost entirely upon visual communication. In order for students to see fellow students and the instructor simultaneously, we set up our room in a "horseshoe" pattern for seating. This enables the instructor to make eye contact with all students, and for any given student to make eye contact with anyone else in the room. This is the only way in which spontaneous Q&A and conversation can take place. For instruction of new vocabulary or more advanced concepts, we rely heavily on PowerPoint slides and video examples. In temporary rooms we have tried to use COWs, the screens of which are too small to be seen from the back wall of the room, where at least 30% of the students are sitting.

Because of the required seating arrangements in ASL, only a very large classroom will house 30 students in an arrangement that allows for visual communication. In small rooms, like LA 202, instruction becomes lecture and student interaction becomes impracticable if not impossible. This is one reason that both the Americans Sign Language Teachers Association and the Conference of Interpreter Trainers

recommend class sizes of 12 students. We recognize that this doesn't reflect the reality of contemporary community college standards; indeed, although 30 students is not a realistic cap for effective instruction, we averaged 32 students per section last year. This was done both to help the college achieve its FTES targets and to improve our program's productivity quotient. Given that, in order to be effective with 30 students, we need sufficient space to arrange them in a way that allows for visual communication with each other and their instructors.

Over the past several years, the department chair for foreign language/ASL has worked cooperatively with the department chair of Behavioral Science to use large rooms over which they have scheduling priority in times when they find it difficult to fill classes. As a result, we sometimes are able to have classes in LA 203, LA 217, LA 223, or LA 221 at 2:35 or 6:00 p.m. This must be renegotiated each semester. These rooms have sufficient space for seating, but the projection equipment either has too small of a projected image or is housed in a cart that blocks visual communication between participants. Foreign Language has scheduling priority in four rooms: LA115 (ASL), LA 201 (Spanish), LA 224 (Spanish), and LA202 (Spanish and Japanese). Spanish, which serves the same number of FTES as ASL, has scheduling priority in 2.5 rooms; ASL has priority in one room. Unfortunately, LA 202 is simply not large enough to effectively instruct 30 students using visual instructional methods. We used to have access to LA225, another large room, but it was reassigned to the new Language Lab.

The ASL Program has unique instructional needs. Because our instruction observes the tenets of Deaf Culture, students may not be passive, may not feign understanding, and must be clearly, visually oriented at all times. In order for that to happen, ASL needs an LCD projector that is off of the floor. Although the LA building does not allow for ceiling mounted projectors, the new Epson wall-mounted, short-throw projectors have solved that problem. Only a dedicated room in which we have scheduling priority will allow us to specifically decorate and engineer the room to maximize instructional effectiveness. Having to be a guest in another department's room every semester greatly reduces that efficacy. It also results in lost instructional time as instructors struggle to set up equipment, have difficulties with internet connectivity due to moving carts, or projecting 40-inch images to student sitting 30 and 40 feet from the screen. Valuable instructional time is lost to the need for having students move desks into a horseshoe pattern and the beginning of class and returning them to rows before class's end. This is to say nothing of the remaining ten or 15 desks, when students move into groups for learning activities or stand to give a response, they often have to step over desks creating a decidedly hazardous situation.

This is an untenable difficulty and we need help to resolve it. The ASL Program is asking for administrative assistance in securing one additional large room—ideally in the Language Arts Building—suitable for visual instruction in which we have scheduling priority. Year after year, we have demonstrated no difficulty in filling a room from 8:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Were we to have a second room, we could request an additional short throw projector and engineer the seating in a permanent way saving several hours of instructional time each semester, creating a comfortable and safe environment in which to teach and learn.