

Proposal for Including American Sign Language in the Cornell University Curriculum

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Introduction

Although Cornell prides itself as an institution where any student can find instruction in any study, there are currently no avenues to obtain a formal education in American Sign Language at Cornell. The university does not offer formal American Sign Language courses for its students, nor does it accept foreign-language credit for ASL classes taken in high school; doing so, however, would benefit both Cornell students and the Ithaca community as a whole. An increasing number of schools across the country, including Ivy League institutions and local Universities, are choosing to offer American Sign Language courses, while Cornell lags behind. The following report discusses national and regional statistics, ASL programs within the Ivy League, and the potential benefits a Cornell ASL program could have for students and the Ithaca community.

National Statistics

As of 2014, American Sign Language is taught at 122 K-12 schools¹, making it the third most commonly taught language in the United States². Additionally, from 2009 to 2013 the number of students studying ASL increased over 19%, while the number of students studying Spanish, French, German, Japanese and Italian all decreased over the same period³. Clearly, the demand for ASL instruction is high and rising within the United States.

This trend is further reflected by College statistics. Across the country, nearly 500 colleges and universities offer courses in ASL⁴, and 185 universities accept American Sign Language for foreign language credit, including Stanford University, Brandeis University, Yale University, and the University of Pennsylvania⁵. Going beyond introductory courses, 46 universities offer a degree in American Sign Language⁶, and 119 colleges offer a degree in ASL interpretation.⁷

Unfortunately, Cornell University is not included in these exciting statistics. Cornell does not currently accept ASL credit from high school courses as it does with other languages, nor does it offer an opportunity for

¹ "The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA): Less Commonly Taught Languages." *The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA): Less Commonly Taught Languages*. N.p., 2014. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

² "Most Studied Foreign Languages in the US." *Infoplease*. Sandbox Network, Inc, 2016. Web. 05 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0905275.html>>.

³ "Most Studied Foreign Languages in the US." *Infoplease*. Sandbox Network, Inc, 2016. Web. 05 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0905275.html>>.

⁴ "The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA): Less Commonly Taught Languages." *The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA): Less Commonly Taught Languages*. N.p., 2016. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

⁵ Wilcox, Sherman. "Universities That Accept ASL In Fulfillment Of Foreign Language Requirements." *Universities That Accept ASL In Fulfillment Of Foreign Language Requirements*. N.p., 11 Oct. 2016. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

⁶ "Big Future - College Search - Find Colleges and Universities by Major, Location, Type, More." *Big Future - College Search - Find Colleges and Universities by Major, Location, Type, More*. The College Board, 2016. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search?major=662_American%2BSign%2BLanguage%2B%28ASL%29>

⁷ "Big Future - College Search - Find Colleges and Universities by Major, Location, Type, More." *Big Future - College Search - Find Colleges and Universities by Major, Location, Type, More*. The College Board, 2016. Web. 05 Dec. 2016. <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search?major=664_Sign%2BLanguage%2BInterpretation>.

students to continue or begin their ASL education. In this respect, it is clear that Cornell is lagging behind many other institutions.

Ivy League ASL Involvement

With the exception of Cornell, every Ivy League institution offers resources for students to wish to formally learn ASL. Brown University⁸ and the University of Pennsylvania⁹ maintain thorough ASL curriculums through their language departments, and the University of Pennsylvania¹⁰ also allows students to minor in Sign Language and Deaf Studies. Harvard University¹¹ offers a sequence of two introductory courses in ASL. Princeton offered an ASL course in 2014, and although it was not for credit, interest in the class led university to offer a course entitled “Linguistics of American Sign Language.”¹² Similarly, Dartmouth College offered a not-for-credit ASL class in 2012, and now offers “American Sign Language Poetry.”¹³ At Columbia University, students can enroll in an accredited ASL class through an on-campus group.¹⁴ Additionally, while Yale University does not provide formal ASL instruction, students may take ASL courses elsewhere to fulfill graduation requirements. As with the University of Pennsylvania and Brown University, Yale accepts ASL as a foreign language.¹⁵

It is clear that most Ivy League institutions acknowledge the importance of ASL and recognize the skills of students who have learned the language. Cornell, however, does not offer an ASL class, nor does it have resources on campus for anyone who wishes to learn the language. Furthermore, Cornell does not accept ASL classes taken at another university for foreign language credit. Compared to other universities in the Ivy League, Cornell provides fewer resources to learn ASL and is less accommodating to students who have already taken ASL courses.

Regional ASL Involvement

American Sign Language is also popular throughout upstate New York. In our own city, for example, Ithaca College offers introductory and intermediate level American Sign Language and Deaf Culture courses, through the Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology¹⁶. Additionally, colleges and

⁸ "Brown University." *Courses for Spring 2017 | Center for Language Studies*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

⁹ "Penn Language Center." *American Sign Language (ASL) | Penn Language Center*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

¹⁰ "Undergraduate Minor in American Sign Language and Deaf Studies." *UPenn Linguistics: Undergraduate Minor in American Sign Language and Deaf Studies*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

¹¹ "Courses." *Courses*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

¹² "Linguistics of American Sign Language." *Princeton University: Office of Registrar*. Trustees of Princeton University (C) 2006, n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

<https://registrar.princeton.edu/course-offerings/course_details.xml?courseid=013284&term=1162>.

¹³ Polansky, Larry. "American Sign Language Poetry." *Dartmouth.edu*. N.p., 27 Jan. 2015. Web. 05 Dec. 2016. <http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/asl_material/index.html>.

¹⁴ "Welcome to CU Sign." *CU Sign - Sign Language Club at Columbia University*. Columbia University, n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/sign/>>.

¹⁵ Wilcox, Sherman, Phd. "Universities That Accept ASL In Fulfillment Of Foreign Language Requirements." *Universities That Accept ASL In Fulfillment Of Foreign Language Requirements*. University of New Mexico, 11 Oct. 2016. Web. 05 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.unm.edu/~wilcox/UNM/univlist.html>>.

¹⁶ "Ithaca College." *Ithaca College - Deaf Studies Minor*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

universities across the upstate New York region that offer courses in ASL include, but are not limited to, Elmira College, Broome Community College, Syracuse University, Le Moyne College, SUNY Oneonta, and SUNY Buffalo.

In the city of Rochester alone, two higher education institutions, namely Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and the University of Rochester, offer majors and minors in ASL. RIT is famously known for its National Technical Institute for the Deaf, which offers technical degree programs that are accommodated to fit the needs of Deaf individuals seeking higher education. RIT provides one of the most accessible campuses in the world for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, by providing interpreting, captioning, and note-taking in and outside the classroom¹⁷. RIT's layout is a model in which Cornell can emulate in order to attract more highly-intelligent students who require a more accessible campus to fit their needs.

Courses in American Sign Language in the upstate New York region are found under multiple departments, including the Modern Languages, Linguistics, Speech and Language Disabilities Curriculum, and the Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology. It is evident that these higher education institutions recognize the broad-reaching impacts of ASL, and are working to provide their students with opportunities to learn the language and culture. Cornell has the power and means to begin the process of creating a more accessible and accommodating campus by offering courses in American Sign Language, just like other regional colleges and universities in New York state.

ASL for Students with Disabilities

In addition to helping those who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, or want to get involved in the Deaf community, an American Sign Language course would benefit students with disabilities. For example, people with auditory processing disorders have a difficult time processing auditory inputs, which makes studying foreign languages with new phonological systems particularly challenging.¹⁸ ASL courses for credit would allow these students to fulfill their foreign language requirement in a way that does not disadvantage them, compared to other students. Additionally, many students with dyslexia have found American Sign Language easier to learn than other foreign languages¹⁹.

Local Impact/TIP/LEP

An American Sign Language course offered at Cornell University would benefit not only the Cornell community but also the greater Ithaca and Tompkins County communities. Having a certified instructor of ASL would give students who are fluent in the language the opportunity to become certified as ASL interpreters and participate in the Translator Interpreter Program (TIP) through Cornell's Public Service Center. As stated on

¹⁷ "NTID." *NTID: By the Numbers*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

¹⁸ Delana. "Help for Children with Central Auditory Language Processing Disorders." *The Education Cafe*. N.p., 23 Dec. 2013. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

<<https://theeducationcafe.wordpress.com/2009/11/18/help-for-children-with-central-auditory-language-processing-disorders/>>.

¹⁹ "One Student's Experience Learning ASL * The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity." *One Student's Experience Learning ASL * The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity*. N.p., 2016. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

<<http://dyslexia.yale.edu/americansignlanguage.html>>.

their website, TIP “trains bilingual and multilingual Cornell students and staff to serve as volunteer translators/interpreters for community agencies in emergency and non-emergency situations.”²⁰ However, as there is no current Cornell faculty member who is able to certify students fluent in ASL, the TIP program has no ASL interpreters available.

Consequently, Tompkins County also has no resource for ASL interpretation or translation. This presents a clear problem as the need for ASL interpretation available in the immediate vicinity has arisen and will inevitably arise again. Luckily, this issue would be solved by having a faculty member on campus to teach an ASL class. This faculty member could also certify students who are already fluent in ASL and thus allow Cornell to fulfill the need for a local translator.

Interest in ASL from Cornell University Students

A survey was sent out to students and faculty at Cornell to gauge interest in having ASL courses on campus. In less than one month, more than 600 Cornell students responded to the survey with the following response rate:

- 95% of respondents were present undergraduate students.
- Should ASL be offered and be accepted as a general elective, 57.26% would want to take the course and 33.06% may be interested in taking it.
- Should ASL be offered and be accepted to fulfill a school specific requirement, 67.50% would want to take the course and 25.33% may be interest in taking it.
- Should ASL be offered and be accepted as a foreign language, 68.67% would want to take the course and 22.83% may be interested in taking it.

Conclusion

In order to provide a more accessible and extensive education for all students and enable necessary services to the community, Cornell should offer an American Sign Language course. As other universities follow suit in this nation-wide trend, it becomes increasingly apparent that Cornell is falling behind. Hopefully in the future Cornell will take the necessary steps to right this situation.

²⁰ "Translator Interpreter Program." *Translator Interpreter Program*. Cornell University, n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016. <<http://orgsync.rso.cornell.edu/org/translatorinterpreterprogram72139/home>>.

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