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University’s Deaf Studies program makes its mark

Sacramento State’s Deaf Studies program may be small, but it has proved very productive since its inception six years ago.

Professor Donald Grushkin was chosen to coordinate staffing and curriculum for the innovative program when it was created in 2007. The personable graduate of Gallaudet University, a world-renowned center of learning and research for the Deaf, came to Sacramento State in 2001, when the University had a large sign language program but no major or minor.

Grushkin pressed for the creation of a comprehensive course of study and proceeded to craft a bachelor’s degree program in Deaf Studies, the only one in Northern California.

Nine students were in the first graduating class in 2009; this year, the program expects to graduate roughly 30. More than 100 students are majoring or minoring in Deaf Studies, while 1,000 – many of whom are satisfying the University’s foreign language requirement – are enrolled in American Sign Language classes. (ASL for English speakers is considered to be a category 4 language, with category 5 being the most difficult.) Grushkin believes that students opt to enroll in these tougher classes because they value their instructors and the quality of instruction, which could improve their job prospects.

Program graduates will have earned 41 to 48 units in sign language and Deaf Studies that qualify them to work with the Deaf. Such skills could be especially helpful to students in nonrelated fields that could give them a competitive edge in the job market.

“Our students have a senior capstone course in which they either do volunteer work within area Deaf agencies or schools, or help with other activities,” Grushkin says. These include a spring picnic for the Deaf community and families with Deaf children. In September, many of the program’s students helped with setup for the ASL Festival held at the State Capitol, Grushkin says.

Grushkin and his colleagues see the program as a complement to those at community colleges such as American River, which offers an interpreter training
program. Last year, the state mandated that interpreters have a bachelor’s degree to work in the K-12 system.

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