DEAR FRIENDS OF WORLD LANGUAGES!

"The Department of World Languages and Literatures plays a central role in preparing the students of Portland State University to function in the global community." This mission statement has graced the front page of our website for some time, but what does such preparation entail? We teach students how to navigate the real world in a second language, how to write, how to read, and how to see and understand what others might not even notice. Our students become insightful thinkers and hone their abilities to solve problems creatively. Somewhere along the way, they also become culturally competent, aware and accepting of difference and uniqueness.

The expression "cultural competency" has become ubiquitous, gracing the web pages of professional organizations, school districts, universities, government bodies, and more. Even PSU’s main student organization, The Associated Students of Portland State University, is currently engaged in a campaign for awareness and policy. We believe that acquiring a second language—learning how to function in another culture—encompasses the goals of cultural competency. Faculty and students of world languages regularly encounter difference and uniqueness. Speaking a language or culture, studying abroad is essential. The new skills, relationships, and experiences gained during their travels serve them as they continue in their academic and professional careers. PSU offers nearly 200 study abroad programs in over 80 countries and a wealth of scholarship and funding opportunities to facilitate such an experience. In fact, 455 PSU students set off during the 2013-2014 academic year. Polyglot spoke with five returnees about their time abroad.

When asked how long they had studied the language of their destination before leaving, answers ranged anywhere from two to eight years. As to why they started studying their language, chance and luck played a role for some. In Conrad Henkel’s case, he says it was “after a few beers on a sunny day” in the Virgin Islands that he decided to enroll in Russian 101. He became so fascinated with the language and culture that he joined PSU’s Russian Flagship Program, changed his major from English to German in his head. Clint says, “My most gratifying achievement is being able to pick up a book and read it in Hebrew without a dictionary (though with a fair amount of interpolation!).” Conrad discovered that he could now understand a Russian video game that was incomprehensible to him before. During his experience in Japan, Jesse’s new friendships contributed greatly to his solid speaking skills.

These students traveled to a foreign country in order to learn and experience things about a particular culture that could not be found in the classroom or in a textbook. Sarah Goodwin was impressed by the reliable and convenient public transportation available in Heidelberg. Conrad was moved by the lengths to which Russian youth will go in order to ensure the well-being of their friends, making sure that everyone makes it home safely after a night out. And Jesse realized that Japan is a diverse place filled with all kinds of different peoples, and that places can never be reduced to a simple stereotype.

While World Languages and Literatures can make the first of these more accessible through the classroom, students’ extended experience abroad through study or internship can significantly influence their beliefs and behaviors. Speaking a second language and thereby seeing the world through another’s eyes is one of the surest paths toward cultural competency and becoming a global citizen.

According to a National Association of Colleges and Employers report published online on October 15, 2014, world languages majors were the top-paid liberal arts majors upon graduation. Clearly, employers value the powerful combination of aptitudes and skills our students develop that makes them not only better people but also greater assets to companies. We are proud that our students are strategically positioned to land a well-paying job upon graduation. We are even prouder that, along the way, they might even learn to order a glass of champagne to celebrate.

"Study abroad is an awesome experience. It can help you change and grow in an educational sense as well as personally." Sarah Goodwin

PSU students Conrad Henkel and Hueston White in front of St. Basil’s Cathedral

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HERITAGE SPANISH AT PSU: Building on Rich Cultural and Linguistic Foundations

FOR OVER A DECADE, WLL HAS been offering Spanish for Heritage Speakers. The population of Hispanic students at PSU rose 60% in the last five years and is expected to double within the next five years. As a result, enrollment in the Spanish for Heritage Speakers courses offered at PSU has been on the rise.

In the Southwest, over half of all Spanish students are heritage speakers. At large schools in Southern California, it’s normal to find more sections offered to speakers than to second language learners. However, at PSU and the majority of schools in the US, most students at the lower levels take Spanish as a second language. But as student demographics continue to diversify, there is a need to offer courses specifically geared towards individuals who grew up in the US in an environment where a language other than English was spoken. This is because heritage language courses differ in fundamental ways from second language courses.

For one, Spanish heritage speakers are studying Spanish as one of their first languages. Since they probably haven’t studied formal grammar, they may not be able to use Spanish in an academic or professional way. What they do possess, in addition to a vast colloquial register and lexicon, is an invaluable linguistic resource: native-speaker intuition. According to Professor Robert Sanders, one of the main goals of these heritage language courses is to prepare students “to use Spanish in a native manner in their academic and professional careers.” The courses build on their rich lexicon, teaching them formal equivalents for what they already know colloquially. Certainly, the goal of most language courses is to have students teach academic and professional levels of competency. But heritage language courses also serve another, perhaps equally important function: helping heritage speakers become aware of the value of their cultural and linguistic heritage. Heritage language courses at PSU aid the students in developing an awareness and appreciation of the skills they already possess.

WLL collaborates with PSU’s Chicano/Latino Studies program in promoting these courses. The hope is that heritage speakers, regardless of their field, decide to earn a minor or certificate in either Spanish or Chicano/Latino Studies. Furthermore, there are Spanish-speaking faculty in other departments who accept coursework in Spanish, giving everyone who has this linguistic resource an opportunity to employ it during their academic career. Faculty and alumni have also raised awareness of these courses through various events, including last year’s Spanish heritage essay contest that offered $1,200 in prizes. With an increasingly diverse campus population, WLL is providing courses and opportunities for bilingual students to forge ahead in their academic and professional careers.

WELCOME NEW FACULTY MEMBERS!

Two faculty members joined the department this fall. William Conner, Ph.D., serves as the new Director of the Russian Flagship Center and Associate Professor of Russian. He specializes in second language acquisition and early twentieth-century Russian literature.

Justin Coleman is our new Senior Instructor of ASL and brings with him an extensive background in visual and deaf theater.

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