


DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, JOURNALISM,
AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

OU to offer minor in communication and deaf studies



OU ASL Instructor Tim Johnston and his wife, Katie, sign to each other.

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This fall, Oakland University will roll out a new academic minor in communication and deaf studies. Requiring a minimum of 20 credits, the minor will be offered through the university's communication program and will introduce students to American Sign Language (ASL), types and degrees of hearing loss, advocacy for the Deaf and hard of hearing, deaf culture and the promotion of deaf awareness.

“Within our program, we emphasize and value multicultural communication,” said Robert Sidelinger, professor and communication program director. “We want our students to appreciate communication from multiple perspectives. Most of our classes focus on verbal communication, but this is another important aspect of communication – the Deaf community has a unique language and culture.”

The minor builds on a tradition of ASL education at OU that dates back nearly 50 years.

“ASL classes started at OU in the 1970s,” Sidelinger said. “Students have loved these classes for decades.”

Initially, ASL classes only counted toward the language co-requisite in the communication program. In 2019, they began counting toward the modern language requirement in the university’s general education curriculum.

“After ASL started counting as a general education course, we saw an uptick in our enrollment in those classes,” Sidelinger said. “We developed the minor building off that student interest. It also aligns with Oakland’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.”

Paul Fugate, who has taught ASL classes at OU for 20 years, said the minor is a welcome addition that provides skills pertinent to many fields, from health care, to law enforcement, to customer service and more.

“Having a minor in communication and deaf studies will help you in any career that you go into, because you never know when you’re going to run across a deaf person,” said Fugate. “If you work with the public, you’re going to encounter them. You might even have a coworker who is deaf.”

Along with teaching at OU, Fugate has worked as an ASL interpreter and teacher in the Bloomfield Hills School District, taught at a school for the Deaf and set up an ASL program in the Romeo School District. He was inspired to learn sign language early in life when he worked with a deaf person at Miller’s Big Red Apple Orchard in Washington Township. His interest in teaching was cemented by an experience he had interpreting between a deaf student and his mother in Bloomfield Hills Schools.

“Mom, I want you to learn how to sign,” said the middle school student.

“Sorry, I don’t have time,” the mother answered.

“I had to tell her son that she didn’t want to learn how to sign,” Fugate recalled. “That moment I decided to develop a website for anyone to learn how to sign, and it’s being used across the country.”

The website ASLDeafined.com features more than 400 themed lessons with activities designed to help students learn and retain ASL knowledge, including a searchable dictionary with around 17,000 words. There’s also an app that people can use on their phone. Fugate frequently incorporates these tools into his classes at OU.

“In class, I introduce words and we practice the words and put them into sentences and try to communicate with the words,” he said. “Then, the students go home and do the retention exercises. Just like with any language, the more you practice the better you’ll become.”

The students also integrate their ASL knowledge into various projects, sharing what they’ve learned with others.

“For one of the projects, I have them teach an ASL lesson to somebody and record it, because if you can teach something to someone, then you own it,” Fugate explained. “I try to empower my students to take learning into their own hands – literally in the case of ASL.”

He added, “I applaud everything OU has done to promote deaf studies. Like anyone else, deaf people are a part of society. They’re our neighbors and coworkers, and the more people know about them, the better life is for everyone.”

The communication and deaf studies minor requires students to complete four core courses – Introduction to Communication Studies, Introduction to American Sign Language, American Sign Language and American Sign Language III, along with one elective course. To learn more, view the [web page](#).