

Ignorance abounds at the backwards Old Dominion University

ODU faculty committee says ASL is not a real language

QUOTE

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UNQUOTE

Article:

**Is signing a foreign language? ODU tells student no, then maybe.**

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By Matthew Bowers

The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK

David Packard wants to be a nuclear medicine technician. That means college, which requires a foreign language. And that's where his problem lay, at least until recently.

Packard, a rising junior from Fairfax County, asked Old Dominion University to count the three years of American Sign Language he took in high school as his general college language requirement in the same way it credits the study of other languages.

Packard, 21, is dyslexic - letters and words appear jumbled before his eyes - and traditional language classes that often emphasize phonics have been beyond him.

ODU said no. Sign language - communication by hand gestures used by and for those who can't hear - doesn't reflect a distinct "culture" in the context of foreign languages, officials told him.

ODU officials reversed themselves Thursday, at least in his case. Packard said an official told him after his last final exam that he would only have to take a foreign culture class.

But the issue of whether to offer sign language as a foreign language remains before ODU's Faculty Senate, which is expected to take it up again in the fall. Its decision would change how the language is viewed by the university.

"It's kind of surprising because one of the things ODU prides itself on is diversity," Packard said. "It's kind of like they're shutting the door."

Packard never wanted to transfer, he said. He likes ODU otherwise, and he and his father praised the school for making other accommodations for his learning disabilities. He also has attention-deficit problems.

Packard said that ODU first suggested that he try a traditional language course and, if he did poorly, he could take the culture class as a substitute.

Despite tutoring, he did miserably in Spanish when he tried it in eighth grade. He and his father didn't want to spend the time and money to try again, especially if it might hurt Packard's grades and possibly keep him out of the program he was seeking.

He and his father, Laurence Packard, agree with those who say that sign language represents a distinct culture. In high school, David Packard wrote papers and took tests on deaf culture, and he attended deaf-themed events.

"All you have to do is speak to people at **Gallaudet**," said Laurence Packard, referring to the university for deaf students in Washington, D.C. The signing world "has its own culture - it's a whole subgroup of American students."

A survey released in November by the Modern Language Association showed that American Sign Language had risen to become the fourth most-studied language on American college campuses - 5 percent of all language enrollments.

Several colleges offer or accept it as a foreign language, including the University of Virginia. Students at [U.Va.](#) can receive credit for prior experience by passing a test.

Norfolk State University, on the other hand, offers sign language, but not for foreign language credit.

ODU spokeswoman Jennifer Mullen said the university considers the foreign language requirement to be a faculty issue. No overall changes have been made to ODU's foreign language requirements, she said, and the school couldn't discuss an individual student's situation.

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William Drewry, retiring chairman of the Faculty Senate, persuaded his peers to

further discuss the issue in the next school year. He backs accepting sign language, influenced by his first experience with a deaf student last year, and said he believes more investigation will convince others.

"I'd like to shake this thing loose," he said.

Matthew Bowers, (757) 222-3893, [matthew.bowers@pilotonline.com](mailto:matthew.bowers@pilotonline.com) A November survey by the Modern Language Association showed that American Sign Language has risen to become the fourth most-studied language on American college campuses.

Caption: Michael Kestner The Virginian-Pilot David Packard, a rising junior at Old Dominion University, demonstrates his knowledge of sign language learned in high school. Packard, who has problems with written language, now only has to take a foreign culture class to meet ODU's requirements.

Memo: the request

David Packard, who is dyslexic, asked ODU to count his study of American Sign Language as a foreign language to meet scholastic requirements. the decision

Originally, ODU said sign language doesn't reflect a culture in the context of foreign languages. The officials reversed themselves in Packard's case on Thursday, but the overall policy stands pending further review. still growing

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<http://www.odu.edu/>

ODU ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES:

<http://www.odu.edu/oduhome/admin/index.shtml>