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American Sign Language and the Academy: The Little Language That Could¹

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Once upon a time, and not so very long ago, American Sign Language (ASL) was barely known to the Modern Language Association (MLA), an organization of more than 300,000 members in one hundred countries whose “members have worked to strengthen the study and teaching of language and literature.”² Until 1997, in fact, ASL was listed in only the definitive *MLA International Bibliography* under “invented” languages—followed directly by the Klingon language of *Star Trek* fame. In 1997, the MLA formed the Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession (CDI). Spurred on by some members of the MLA’s newly formed CDI and grounded in remarkable linguistic scholarship over the previous three decades that has documented the unique but also common language features of ASL (Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Stokoe et al., 1965), a formal request was made to the MLA that ASL be included among the “natural” languages, alongside Spanish, German, French, and the like. The MLA bibliographers, staff, and executive director, then Phyllis Franklin, listened intently to our argument. We gathered a substantial record of linguistic scholarship not only about ASL but also about sign languages around the globe, demonstrating the foundational nature of sign languages *as languages* and illustrating their unique contributions to both the study and the expression of language as we had come to know it in oral/aural and print-dominated cultures.

Yet, some forty years after William Stokoe’s groundbreaking dictionary on ASL and despite considerable linguistic research pouring in from all around the globe that could easily prove that ASL is indeed a natural language, a real language, even a wondrous language (as indeed all languages are), we are still trying to “invent” ASL as an entity within such key academic organizations as the MLA and within the academy generally. Scholars of ASL literature, literacy, and linguistics continue to struggle to find a comfortable place within the MLA—especially deaf scholars, whose access is still limited at the MLA conferences, and ASL teachers, who might belong to the national American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) but who generally do not hold terminal degrees and often teach only part time, at most, in colleges and universities around the country.³

It is time to move on. It is time to move away from the defensive outsider and approval-seeking positions that ASL has typically occupied in the academy, especially in relation to other foreign and modern languages. It is time to move our discussions, perspectives, and placements of ASL into a position of potential, promise, and linguistic-cultural power.

In the spirit of that move, I will ground all the points I make in this [discussion] by invoking ASL as the little language that could: the little language that could in fact turn out to be anything but little for those students who get the chance to learn it during their college years; the little language that could make us think hard about what language is and can do, challenging and yet also affirming our ideas and beliefs about languages and culture; and the little language that could rumble and steam right through the established stations of language and literature programs in the academy, potentially overtaking some of the bigger trains.

The use of the “little engine that could” narrative is not incidental. As a moralistic children’s story with a decidedly (American) nationalistic slant in the 1930s, authored by a pseudonymous “Watty Piper” and featuring the little blue engine as female against her stronger, tougher male counterparts, the metaphor/narrative reconstructs much of the Deaf community’s considerable efforts to assimilate and paint its (deaf) faces as American in the first half of the 20th century in particular (Buchanan, 2001; Burch, 2002).

An Academic Home for ASL?

Take but one brief and bold example of the challenges offered by the little language that could: ASL offered to American college students and confirmed as credits on their transcripts as a *foreign* language. In the United States, how can an American

1 From the chapter in Brueggemann, B. (2009). *Deaf subjects: Between identities and places*, copyright © New York University Press, 2009.

2 See the Modern Language Association’s Website at <http://www.mla.org/about>

3 See the American Sign Language Teachers Association’s Website at <http://www.aslta.org/index.html>

language also be a foreign language?⁴ What nation declares its own language to be foreign? Perhaps, then, what ASL helps illuminate is the very (odd) nature of terms like “foreign” (as opposed to “modern”) used in describing languages during an era of fluid and frequent global interactions. With American Sign Language, the poles and grounds for “national” versus/and “foreign” more or less dissolve.

Just as ASL questions the place of adjectives like “foreign” and its own place within a construct of “foreign,” it also articulates—and complicates—questions of disciplinary and departmental boundaries in the academy. We might think of ASL as the engine with no house—a gypsy language, as it were. Sheryl Cooper’s 1997 dissertation on the academic status of sign language programs in institutions of higher education in the United States demonstrates ASL’s wanderlust. Although 36.8 percent of the programs and administrators that Cooper surveyed recommended placing ASL among the modern or foreign languages, this percentage obviously did not constitute a majority, let alone a strong one. Interestingly enough, 12.6 percent recommended that sign language be a department of its own, a situation that does not commonly exist for any language. Meanwhile, 10.5 percent placed it in speech pathology/audiology departments, and a nearly equal number suggested that it be placed in any one of five different places: Deaf Education, Deaf Studies, Interpreting, Linguistics, or Special Education (Cooper, 1997).

Such variation in views regarding ASL’s academic affiliation highlights the challenge of administrative structure for ASL in the academy. And this challenge, I argue, illustrates how much ASL has gathered steam in challenging the university overall and our ideas about language departments, more specifically. Consider for a moment what it means when a language can stand on par with other modern languages in the university structure—even occupy a space all its own—but can also be placed in domains alongside the professional instruction of those who “help” or “service” deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Imagine for a moment if we taught so-called developing-world languages only within departments that might send professionals to relevant developing countries to “help” their people or if religion (through missionary work) or medicine (through general health care or even AIDS research or care programs) became the predominant home for such languages. What a “foreign” idea that would be!⁵

At my own institution, Ohio State University, we have built an ASL program that gives students general-education credit (GEC) in a “foreign” language, in a unique answer to the “placement” question posed by Cooper’s dissertation.⁶ The program is now in its sixth year. Our ASL program for undergraduate foreign-language credits has spanned and involved three different colleges. Initially, the two introductory courses, ASL I and II, were taught in the College of Humanities, under the wing of the English department. And, while “under the wing” does have significant metaphorical potential, both positive and negative, we argued that we could place part of the ASL program in that position because at Ohio State we have nothing like an American Studies program. English Studies, where American language and literature is typically taught at Ohio State University, is the closest fit. We could also argue that ASL would best be housed in the English department because the department is widely familiar and has a long track record of running a significant number of the university’s required general-education and basic-level courses—courses like the first- and second-year required writing courses and Introduction to Fiction, Introduction to Poetry, and so forth. The English department knew well how to handle the business of all those students in introductory, skills-based courses. (And this argument has, I would add, proved to be all the more important as we have worked to iron out policies and procedures for hiring qualified teachers, for continuing the professional development of our teachers, and for addressing students’ concerns and complaints.)

Students who have completed ASL II can then move to the third- and fourth-level courses in the sequence (four courses in a language are required for the completion of the general-education foreign-language requirements at Ohio State). These last two courses can be taken either in the College of Education and Human Ecology (in the Department of Teaching and Learning) or in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences (in the Speech and Hearing department). What we have tried to set in motion, then, is a triangulated program in which students get at least two (and possibly even three) different disciplinary entries into, and intersections with, the language. The content of each course—the actual skills to be learned—is supposed to remain the same for each level of the course, no matter where that course is taught. The teachers and coordinators have worked out a kind of standard curriculum and syllabus for each course; while variation is allowed in an individual teacher’s approaches and activities, the key objectives and elements for the courses remain the same, no matter where they are being taught. In theory, at least.

4 See Christopher Krentz on the “foreign” and “familiar” nature of ASL, especially within American universities, in “Proposal for ASL to Satisfy Foreign Language Requirements,” at <http://artsandsciences.virginia.edu/asl/t8.html>

5 Even though this idea might be somewhat “foreign” to many people, as someone who grew up deaf/hard-of-hearing in the years right before “mainstreaming” become a popular form of deaf education, I could (and would) just as easily argue that I, for one, would like nothing more than if every speech pathology/audiology professional, every physician in training, and every special education teacher (indeed, every teacher, “special” or not) learn some basic ASL!

6 See Ohio State University’s American Sign Language Program Website at <http://asl.osu.edu/>

We are still not sure how all this is playing out in practice. The ASL program is currently undergoing an extensive “outcomes” assessment, as well as engaging in its own study of itself via focus-group discussions of students, teachers, and program administrators across the three colleges/units. ASL at Ohio State is new, and we are in fact still driving it without a dashboard of standardized assessment measures in place. In some ways, this reminds me of how I learned to drive growing up in western Kansas: My parents and grandparents turned me loose behind the wheel of Grandpa’s old blue Ford pickup in the big, open cow pasture behind their farm house, gave me some basic instructions on gears, clutches, brakes, accelerator—and then let me go. It was exhilarating to get the feel of the thing, bumping along over gopher holes with dried cow patties flying behind me, creating a little dust cloud to mark the path I had taken, and not worrying about which way I should turn or go next. And I learned well the basics of the machine and its movement by driving this way. But soon I wanted more: a road to travel, a radio that actually worked, a destination and goal, a more finely tuned knowledge of navigation involving blinkers, lights, different driving conditions, and—most important of all—the ability to travel and negotiate with others also on the road.

In thinking about ASL’s attempts and abilities to navigate and negotiate with other languages currently on the road, let me dwell for a moment on our own enrollment numbers and issues at Ohio State. With approximately 300 new students enrolled each quarter in our ASL I classes and also up to 300 students on the waiting lists for that first-level course every quarter (some students wait up to four quarters), ASL is obviously a language that is very popular with our students these days. And that popularity on my own campus has been borne out by a recent survey completed by the Association of Departments of Foreign Language (ADFL) and published in the *ADFL Bulletin* in 2004. Whatever the reasons for ASL’s considerable popularity—and we do have some sense of those various reasons from our survey of students in the ASL I course—the evidence does seem to indicate that ASL has the potential to threaten other languages being offered on college campuses.⁷

I use that verb “threaten” quite deliberately. For, in a university fiscal environment where budgets are now built on enrollments generated—the “butts in seats” budget, as I have heard it called at my own university—ASL constitutes a potential “cash cow.” When one adds to its revenue-generating status the fact that foreign and modern language enrollments on college campuses overall have been noticeably lower over the past decade or so (although they are now showing a slight increase again), the threat of one language “stealing” seats from another becomes very real. At Ohio State University, in fact, our Foreign Language Center (FLC)—which houses virtually all the other languages taught at our huge university—would not initially touch ASL with the proverbial ten-foot pole when we began trying to build the program six years ago.

After six successful years with the ASL program located across three colleges (but not as part of the FLC)—from 2002 through 2008—we have just recently reconfigured the program again so that it is now squared (as opposed to triangulated in three areas), and the FLC does, in fact, house the key administrative coordinator who will help right the angles better among the other three original units invested in the program. In the original construction of the ASL program, however, it was explained to me, while the FLC faculty were not at all “philosophically opposed” to the language, they also did not want to take on the sizable faculty resistance that would likely be encountered from colleagues who taught German, Italian, French, and so forth, who feared that ASL might begin to siphon off their already dwindling enrollments. Only enrollment in Spanish-language classes, it seems, remains unaffected by ASL enrollments. Yet, our own survey at Ohio State has shown us that ASL does not really seem to be threatening enrollment in (other) languages, since many of the ASL students already have another language enrollments on their record or are declaring their interest in ASL as a result of direct family or other personal or professional interests.

Moreover, when our FLC proposed and received significant funds from the SBC-Ameritech communications company some years ago in order to establish research and innovation in instruction using various technologies as part of its presence in Ohio State’s new World Media and Culture Center, ASL was not included in that funding proposal. On this matter, I could not help pondering the irony of Alexander Graham Bell’s legacy in relationship to deafness and deaf people: his early role as an oral-focused teacher of the deaf (including his future wife); his place as the son and husband of deaf women; his niche in the American eugenics movement, carved out predominantly because of his work on charting and graphing the “marriages and progeny” of deaf people in order to prove that when deaf people married deaf people, they tended to produce deaf children

⁷ Some of the data we have collected from students who are enrolled in ASL 101 (the first-level course) over a three-year period show us that undergraduates enrolled in the ASL I class are students from the following colleges: (1) 56 percent from Arts and Sciences, including the Colleges of Arts, Biological Sciences, Humanities, Math and Physical Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences; (2) 15 percent from Health, Medical, and Biological Sciences; (3) 14 percent from Journalism and Communication; (4) 3 percent from Human Ecology; (5) 3 percent from Education; (6) and 6 percent other colleges. The student survey also indicates that, while 44 percent of the students enrolled in ASL 101 claim they are taking it primarily to fulfill their general-education language requirement, 56 percent of the students are taking it for other reasons and do not need it for their general-education requirements. Of those 56 percent who are taking it for reason other than just to meet the language requirements, 39 percent claim they are taking it because of some “affinity” for the language because of an ongoing or previous personal interest in ASL and/or deaf culture; because they have a deaf friend or neighbor; because they have a deaf family member; just to learn more about deaf people and communicate with them; or because of their own current or partial deafness. In addition, 28 percent of the students taking ASL 101 say they have chosen it as an “alternative” to learning other languages because it is “interesting,” “new/different,” “nontraditional,” or “unique” or because the student is a “visual learner.”

and that therefore their marriage should be discouraged and even forbidden; and his invention of the telephone, which resulted from his search to find an oral/aural mechanism to help teach his method of oral instruction, called “Visible Speech,” to deaf students. Thus, when SBC-Ameritech, the offshoot of the once-powerful Bell phone company, provides significant funding for the study of foreign languages at my university that conveniently does not include ASL, Bell’s legacy seems to continue to haunt us.

The Association of Departments of Foreign Language (ADFL) Survey

But perhaps we should not look backward, yet again, to Bell’s toll on ASL and the American Deaf community. Perhaps we should instead cast our gaze forward to the 2002 ADFL survey and study the face that ASL is showing us, at present and for the future. The report, published in the Winter–Spring 2004 issue of the ADFL Bulletin and written by Elizabeth B. Welles, presents not one but many interesting faces for ASL. What I want to do here is outline a few of the faces that I find most interesting and prominent. Let me confess before I go any further that, much like a witness profile, my sketch will be, at its best, probably only sketchy. I also want to clarify that the ADFL survey covers foreign-language enrollments up to 2002 in institutions of higher education. This is important even to me because the program at Ohio State, as but one significant example, has been built since 2002.

Among undergraduates and graduates at four-year (or plus) colleges, ASL ranked fifth in language course enrollments, with Spanish, French, German, and Italian placing ahead of it. This constitutes a shocking 432 percent increase in ASL enrollments at four-year colleges since 1998. When the ADFL began its survey, in 1986, ASL did not even exist in numbers on the survey. This ADFL report also tells us that ASL has been recorded in the ADFL survey of foreign-language enrollments only since 1990 and that it “has shown a tremendous increase for each survey since then as more institutions begin to report it.” As the report tries to analyze this trend, however, my own analysis finds the report’s analysis considerably lacking. That is, I want to suggest that there is much left unidentified as to the impact and place of ASL within the ADFL and its official surveying. As Welles begins to work through the massive data now piling up for college enrollments in ASL, she indicates: “The comparison of the 1998 and 2002 institutional figures is particularly useful for explaining the enormous growth of ASL [because] the bulk of the increase occurred through the reporting of institutions that had not responded previously” (2004, p. 142).

But why, we should ask, did these institutions previously not respond? Were they perhaps not asked the right questions to begin with? If the right kinds of questions weren’t being asked in order to elicit responses about ASL offerings and enrollments in the past, would it be surprising that the ADFL was not really receiving any responses? We know that ASL was not even listed in the *MLA International Bibliography* as a “natural” language until 1998; this is the place and point at which I began this [discussion]. It would probably be hard for an institution’s response regarding its ASL offerings even to be “heard” if the language itself had not yet been placed in the *MLA International Bibliography*.

It seems possible that at this point even the ADFL and MLA do not yet know exactly what questions they could, should, or would ask regarding ASL’s entrance and growth in colleges and universities across the United States. It is only through some solid affiliation with such organizations as the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) or with the full participation of ASL and Deaf Studies scholars in the MLA and the ADFL that we are likely to get the right questions—followed by some meaningful answers—about ASL in the academy.

I do not presume to have all the questions (much less the answers) that should be offered, since, as I suggest, framing them would require the collective knowledge of a body of ASL and deaf scholars and teachers. However, I might quickly outline a few key questions:

- Are there patterns in the kinds of colleges offering ASL?
- Where is ASL located within the structures of these colleges in relation to the other languages offered there?
- Is it included among the modern languages or located elsewhere in the college’s disciplinary structure?
- What are the reasons students give for their interest in taking ASL classes?
- What do students say they gain from taking ASL as a language?
- How do overall enrollment patterns (entry level, retention, completion of a sequence of courses) in ASL classes compare to those for other languages taught in U.S. colleges?
- How does the teaching pool (faculty, part-time, graduate student) in ASL offerings on college campuses compare to the teaching pools in the other languages offered?
- How many “native” users of ASL teach it in comparison to the percentage of “native” users who teach other languages?
- How does the professional development and research base in ASL linguistics, teaching, and literature compare to that in other languages?

The 2002 survey report published by Welles in 2004 does in fact suggest some food for further thought, while leaving a lot unchewed. In puzzling over the formidable increase in ASL enrollments, Welles (2004, p. 15) offers the following explanation:

Besides student interest, the increase recorded in 2002 also has to do with a change in the nature of our survey. For over thirty years we have elicited enrollment data on less commonly taught languages by requesting information about “other languages” rather than listing them individually on the survey form. Through the 1998 survey, ASL was in this category, but with the enrollments reported in that survey it joined the list of the more commonly taught languages, then numbering fifteen. As a result, in 2002 ASL was among the fifteen languages about which we explicitly requested information. Many institutions that had not reported their existing ASL programs in 1998 did so in this survey. If these institutions had previously reported their existing ASL enrollments, the remarkable growth in ASL in the current survey might have been more evenly spread out across the three surveys from the 1990s. But it is also notable that 187 new programs were created between 1998 and 2002 to meet growing demand.

There are several things I find interesting in this explanation for the skyrocketing increases in ASL enrollments between 1998 and 2002. First, it is almost as if institutions are being scolded for not reporting their ASL enrollments and for somehow creating a false sense of “remarkable growth.” Shame on us for hiding our ASL programs! But we might look at the explanation another way—in 1998 the re-placement of ASL in the MLA bibliography was only just under way. How, then, would one report and register a language not yet even sanctioned as a language by the very authorities conducting the survey? (I think here of the way that the 2000 U.S. Census finally allowed citizens to check more than one identity box—and people did so in astonishing numbers.)

Why, then, was there no mention in this report of the exclusion of ASL as a recognized “body” within the politics of the ADFL and the MLA in the years before 1998? Why is there not a more careful and thorough attempt to explain the growth in study of a language that enrolled students in numbers somewhere between those for students studying Ancient Greek and Biblical Hebrew in 1998 but then rose 432 percent in its numbers to take fifth place behind Spanish, French, German, and Italian (all languages that did not increase enrollments by more than 30 percent in those same years)? Why is this remarkable increase brushed off in a single paragraph that ends really before it even begins any real discussion or consideration, simply saying that “it is also notable that 187 new programs were created between 1998 and 2002 to meet growing demand.” Notable, indeed. Yet, somehow, even the more phenomenal weight of ASL offerings in two-year colleges—where it now places second in numbers, behind only Spanish, and has seen a 457 percent growth in the past six years—goes utterly unnoted in this report. What are we to make of these omissions?

I do not have the answers to this seemingly rhetorical question, and I realize that an organization such as the ADFL may not often focus exclusively on one language. I intend not to point fingers only at the ADFL or MLA but, in fact, to beckon us all to the table to discuss this together. That is, I believe that the question of ASL’s clear presence in current college language offerings but its absence in overall discussions about language (and culture) learning within higher education is a question that we—meaning not only academic organizations such as the MLA and the ADFL but also scholars of Deaf Studies and ASL (and organizations such as the ASLTA)—ought to be taking up. And taking up together.

Pointing: Toward Politics, Power, and Philosophy

Let me first turn back to my subtitle, “The Little Language That Could,” and gesture toward at least some of the important and interesting things we can learn through the study and use of ASL and contact with it. I want to point to what I hope is a significant amount of promise and potential for the future of ASL in universities like my own and then take us back to what I believe are some of the biggest challenges and potential crises we still have ahead of us for ASL instruction in higher education.

First, the potential. The unique nature of ASL—its performance and passage as a nonprint, nonwritten, visual, and embodied language—is, of course, one of the most significant things that students of the language learn about, through, and with ASL. Consider, for example, the role of new technologies in relation to ASL. What happens to a language like ASL in the wake of digital and video technologies that can now enable sign-language literature to be “published” and shared across distance, time, and space? These are the kinds of questions students and future scholars and teachers of ASL can explore about the little language that could. At my own university, for example, we had some of our ASL students consider these very questions as they participated in a project funded by Battelle Foundation Awards for “technology and human affairs.”⁸

8 See <http://english.osu.edu/asldmo/default.htm>

“The ASL Literature and Digital Media Project,” further funded by a local central Ohio organization called the DEAFund, involved three groups of people: local, national, and international sign-language storytellers and poets; a troupe of digital media people, including students learning about digital media technologies alongside people who use these technologies as part of their daily work in various studios around our large campus; and students in contact with ASL from at least three groups: deaf and hard-of-hearing students in central Ohio, grades 9–12, who participate in CHIPS, the Columbus Hearing Impaired Program; students in grades 7–12 at the Ohio School for the Deaf, in Columbus; and college students (mostly hearing) enrolled in ASL courses at Ohio State. These three groups met for three primary events over the course of two days in May 2005: a three-hour dialogue between scholars and critics who had written about ASL literature and some of the ASL authors and performers who had created that literature; a public evening performance of ASL literature; and all-day workshops where participants learned some of the fundamentals and techniques for creating their own ASL literature. All of these events were recorded with multiple video cameras (in order to capture the language itself in more of its 3-D dimensions). The summer of 2005 was then spent editing and creating a master DVD of the three events for further public distribution.⁹

To date, ASL poetry and storytelling exist in limited degree and quantity on videotape and DVD/CD-ROM. But the movement of ASL literature into the digital realm—online and thus potentially shared globally and free anywhere a person can get to a networked computer—is a fairly new phenomenon. And the potential is vast for the further development of sign-language literatures.

Yet we also still have some advances to achieve in the teaching and learning of ASL. And, while I am buoyed by the potential of endeavors and events like the ASL Digital Media Project, I am also admittedly a bit deflated by the daily teacher shortage we face as we ride on the crest of that 432 percent enrollment increase wave. We have a crisis already near at hand in the adequate instruction of ASL in both higher and public education: We simply do not have enough qualified teachers to meet the demand for these courses. Sometimes we have very qualified interpreters who love the language and also like the idea of teaching ASL; sometimes we have native signers from the deaf community who have taught community-service courses in ASL; and sometimes we actually do have a few truly skilled and qualified language instructors. But it is not easy at this point in the history of ASL instruction, particularly at the college level, to find someone who knows the language well; who knows how to teach a skills-based and skills-level language-program course at the college level where a student’s ability to attain skills at one level can seriously affect that student’s ability to succeed at the next level; who knows what it means to teach the average college student, someone between eighteen and twenty-two years old; who knows what it means to teach in a freshman-sophomore-level general-education required course; and who is willing to only teach part time (and with no real benefits) at our university while also trying to earn a living elsewhere.

As I keep having to remind administrator after administrator in meetings too numerous to remember, just because someone is able to “speak” and “use” the English language, or even write it, does not necessarily mean that he or she is equipped to teach those skills to young college students. The same principle applies to ASL use and to ASL instruction, specifically to college-level instruction of ASL. We simply do not yet have the programs to train the needed teachers or even to establish the qualifications we would want those teachers to have. The American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) has been working on the training, qualification, professional development, and ethical issues for ASL teachers for almost two decades now, although, by its own admission, it is still an organization largely focused on secondary (9–12) instruction of ASL.¹⁰

In addition to the valuable work of the ASLTA, we also need the MLA and its ADFL—and they need us. We need to work together, in affiliation, to establish teacher hiring, professional development, promotion standards for ASL teachers, and the programs that train such teachers in a way that will allow ASL to continue as a unique language among the others so often offered at our colleges and high schools, while also permitting ASL to function equally on the language-learning playing field. American Sign Language—its scholarly research, its literature, and its pedagogical theories and practices—needs a place at the ADFL executive committee table and also in the MLA delegate assembly. From our place at the MLA and ADFL tables, we can watch and learn, among other things, how to negotiate for standards and employment with benefits, dignity, decent pay, and advancement for all those ASL teachers now joining the academic ranks, largely without a Ph.D. in hand and with only part-time employment.

And, as we find our place at those existing tables of language power, we will also need to borrow and adapt knowledge from them to inform the ways we create our own new responses to and knowledge about issues that are important and unique to ASL. There are at least four major considerations we need to hold before us when we place ASL within the academy. First, we need to consider how a college ASL program can help provide access and equity at that institution to deaf and hard-of-hearing members in the community it serves and surrounds. Second, we need to ensure that we develop ASL responsibly—with caution and careful deliberation—in the academy so that we maintain its linguistic and cultural integrity in the face of the cash-cow role

⁹ See the American Sign Language (ASL) Literature and Digital Media Project, Ohio State University, at <http://english.osu.edu/asldmo/default.htm>

¹⁰ See <http://www.aslta.org/index.html>

it potentially plays. Third, we need to consider how an ASL program within higher education can best work to “give back” to the deaf community, finding ways to invite, involve, and invest in the skills and presence of local deaf people. Finally, we cannot ignore the fact that it surely means something for the shape and change of ASL when so many hearing students in American higher education are eager to learn it, while deaf or hard-of-hearing kids all across the country are still all too often kept away from learning ASL.

These are four of the most significant issues we will need to continue to address as ASL grows in the academy. I want to end by emphasizing as strongly as I can our need to organize our political and intellectual forces to advance the promise of ASL literature and language instruction with dignity and grace, with quality and care, and with all the *could* that we can muster.

Since this essay was first written in 2008/2009, much has changed for the landscape of ASL in college/university credits, landscapes, value, and recognition overall. Hooray.

Interested readers might consult the 2016 report from the Modern Language Association here: <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Research/Surveys-Reports-and-Other-Documents/Teaching-Enrollments-and-Programs/Enrollments-in-Languages-Other-Than-English-in-United-States-Institutions-of-Higher-Education>

The next MLA report on language instruction in higher education will take place in Fall 2021.

—Brenda Jo Brueggemann

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