

Making Foreign Language Friendly: The Regional Center for Languages and Cultures Fosters a Global Future

Parlez-vous français? More and more area residents do speak French and Italian, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese too, as Bennington College's Regional Center for Languages and Culture (RCLC) grows by leaps and bounds.

Designed to serve not only the College's needs, but to broaden the opportunities for quality foreign language instruction in the greater Bennington community, the RCLC's successes speak to the need for global communication, even in the most rural of environments.

This fall, 27 adults in Bennington are beginning to speak Spanish and Italian thanks to evening courses offered by the RCLC in conjunction with the Southwest Vermont Career Development Center, and another 16 have registered to learn French this winter in Manchester and Bennington. Pre-schoolers are being introduced to Spanish at the Bennington College Early Childhood Center, while, in area public schools, 148 schoolchildren in grades K-12 are receiving foreign language instruction from top-notch teachers in classroom and after-school programs. Moreover, seven Mount Anthony Union high-schoolers and 12 Community College of Vermont students are earning college credit this semester in any of five language classes offered on the Bennington College campus. All that is in addition to the 204 Bennington College students who have opted to enroll in language courses this semester, despite the lack of a formal language requirement for graduation.

"Right now the demand [for classes and programs] is greater than our ability to meet it," explains RCLC director Isabelle Kaplan, illustrating that, in this new millennium, foreign language interest is greater than ever before. This year's enrollment figures surpass last year's by 300%, in some cases, and many courses such as Japanese, Spanish, and the evening adult education classes were closed when maximum capacity was quickly met.

"Everyone should have a foreign language and be able to use it," that's Kaplan's own philosophy, and, indeed, that of the Center itself. Following the theory that foreign language literacy educates in tolerance and allows speakers to transcend cultural boundaries, the RCLC's faculty, staff, and student workers have set out to broaden the linguistic skills and global understanding of local college students and community members alike. College and adult education courses are so popular that most are full-to-capacity – while elementary, middle, and high schools in Bennington, Manchester, Dorset, Bondville, and Cambridge, NY, are rapidly incorporating the RCLC's learning programs into their curriculum and clamoring for an even broader spectrum of offered languages.

In addition to formal instruction, the RCLC offers classes to broaden cultural understanding through projects such as designing multimedia software for instruction, publishing foreign language newspapers, and analyzing political and social news in targeted geographic areas. The RCLC also hosts visiting professors-in-residence, currently welcoming Chinese scholar Dr. Qinggen Xu, a scholar of comparative literature at Bennington through a grant from the Chinese

government. While on campus, Dr. Xu will participate in class discussions on children's literature, drama, ceramics, and the Chinese opera. A "Chinese Week" is planned for late October, with speakers, recitals, art exhibitions, and meals celebrating the Chinese culture.

New initiatives at the RCLC include studies to better understand language acquisition in relation to age, developmental workshops to teach teachers to better understand and apply foreign language instruction, and a new, low-residency Master of Arts in Teaching a Second Language degree program will be launched in July 2001 to incorporate teaching and language interests.