

New course teaches sign language

By AMELIA ACOSTA
The Dartmouth Staff

While some may learn French or Spanish in college, a class new to the College Courses department this spring has given a group of students the opportunity to learn to speak and translate American Sign Language and meet with the nation's top deaf poets and perform-

ers, while attending lectures by music professor Larry Polansky. "It all happens at this desk."

Because Polansky received a Mellon New Directions Fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2008, the foundation offered him a raise at a time when Dartmouth faculty salaries were

"This is the department of ASL at Dartmouth," Polansky said, gesturing at the desk, comfortable

See COURSE, page 5

The Dartmouth

NEWS

Monday, May 16, 2011

Page 5

Polansky uses grant for new class on deaf literature, culture

COURSE from page 1

frozen, he said. Polansky proposed to use the additional money to facilitate the course at Dartmouth, he said.

"If it was unethical to get a pay raise when my colleagues couldn't," Polansky said. "I asked Dartmouth and the Mellon Foundation if I could use the funding to attract guest teachers, offer them housing and provide interpreters. It's a fairly expensive undertaking, but I thought I had been so fortunate to receive the Mellon that I really needed to pay it back to the community."

Approximately 25 students are enrolled in the new course, which is largely taught by visiting faculty, the majority of whom are deaf scholars, Polansky said. Guest lecturers — including Patrick Graybill, a well-known ASL poet — discuss their own experiences with deaf culture and work in ASL poetry and performance, according to Polansky.

"The class includes four weeks in which visiting deaf faculty come in to teach for the entire week and offer Wednesday night performances at the Hood Museum that are open to the public," he said. "They are very interested in talking about their own work, but their own work also involves information on the deaf experience, deaf culture and linguistic issues."

The second half of the course

has focused on reflections on the guest speakers and improving ASL proficiency, Kini said.

"We really learn a lot from focusing on the speakers' experiences and attending the events outside of class," she said.

The course's unique structure and subject matter makes it a "phenomenal experience," according to Gabriela Meade '14.

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"People are very surprised to hear that ASL poetry is even possible, and it's so fun and unique to delve into a world that defies some of our general ideas about what literature is," Meade said. "We'll do readings or watch movies about famous poets like [Graybill] and the next day you're in class having a one-on-one conversation with him. It's refreshing and fun, and I don't really feel like I'm coming to class."

A primary focus of the class is

to highlight the "parallel world" of deaf culture that many people are unaware of, according to guest lecturer Dennis Cokely, the director of the ASL program at Northeastern University.

"Take every facet of society and you've got thieves, murderers, people who are extremely cultured and every ethnic group in the world," Cokely said. "If you take that whole spectrum, you've got the exact same thing with deaf people, and we really don't know a lot about that world."

The class can also serve to spotlight larger issues of inclusion on a college campus, Polansky said.

"My goal is to use this language as a vehicle for communicating about a part of American culture that most of Dartmouth and most of America knows nothing about," he said. "Any college needs to grapple with its handling of diversity and accessibility and this class has really helped begin a lot of conversations at all levels."

The class will hopefully serve as a model for future Dartmouth courses and as an informational source to increase awareness of ASL literature, Polansky said.

"This class was a pilot program, and it worked really well," he said. "Films and photos of the class are archived on the web so that someone who has an idea like this

and wants to cross this bridge has some data that really doesn't exist anywhere else."

Polansky said he envisions a continuation of the class with an expanded administrative system and the hiring of a permanent deaf faculty member to co-teach the course.

"The administrative reality of the class is hard, because I'm a one-person department dealing with faculty that often has very different needs from other faculty," Polansky said. "I don't think I'm really qualified to teach this class, but if we hired a highly-qualified deaf faculty member I could serve as a liaison to the greater Dartmouth community."

Many of Polansky's students hope to see the College contribute more resources to the class in the future, according to Jackson Shultz, a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies graduate student enrolled in the course.

"This class isn't well-funded because the administration doesn't realize how important classes like these are," he said. "I wish there was an opportunity to include a drill component, because there is a heavy language component. The administration needs to provide more funding and exposure if they want their students to be world class citizens."