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NOTEBOOK

American Students Flocking to Foreign-Language Courses

By ERIC HOOVER

The tongues of American college students are rolling R's in record numbers.

A survey released this month by the Modern Language Association found that more college students than ever were studying foreign languages, and that colleges and universities offered a greater variety of language courses than they did five years ago.

Spanish continued to be the most widely taught language in academe, accounting for 53 percent of total foreign-language enrollments in 2002.

Over all, the number of college students studying foreign languages increased by 17.9 percent, to 1.4 million in 2002, from 1.19 million in 1998. The percentage of students taking a language -- 8.7 percent -- was the highest since 1972.

"Students are clearly recognizing the importance of learning other languages as we become a more global society," says Rosemary G. Feal, the association's executive director.

The next most popular languages after Spanish were French and German. Following several years of decline, enrollments in French courses stabilized and enrollments in German courses rose 12.5 percent since 1998.

Between 1970 and 2002, the number of students enrolled in Japanese-language courses increased nearly eightfold, while enrollments in Chinese courses increased more than fivefold.

The largest increases were in American Sign Language, Arabic, and biblical Hebrew.

In 2002, more than 60,000 students registered for American Sign Language, a 432-percent increase from 1998. While some of that increase results from a change in the survey's data-gathering, the association reports that 186 colleges and universities have started American Sign Language programs since 1998.

During the same period, enrollments in Arabic increased 92.5 percent and biblical-Hebrew enrollments rose 59 percent.

Among the survey's other findings:

- Behind Spanish, French, and German, the most popular languages among college students were, in order, Italian, American Sign Language, Japanese, Chinese, Latin, Russian, ancient Greek, biblical Hebrew, Arabic, modern Hebrew, Portuguese, and Korean.

- The number of less-commonly-taught languages -- including Swahili, Swedish, and Vietnamese -- increased to 148 in 2002, from 137 in 1998.
- Students in the Northeast were more likely to study Italian and Hebrew, while those on the West Coast were more likely to study Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Enrollments in Spanish and Arabic were roughly the same in all regions.

The study, released this month, was paid for by the U.S. Department of Education.

The full survey will appear in the Winter 2003 issue of the *Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin*.

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