

# American Sign Language Accepted as Foreign Language

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**RADFORD, Va.**--High schools throughout Virginia will soon have to recognize American Sign Language credits in the same way as other foreign languages. Virginia colleges and universities must also accept ASL credits as fulfillment of foreign language entrance requirements.

The bill was passed by the General Assembly in February but, at the suggestion of Governor Bob McDonnell, HB 1435 was revised before finally being signed into law on Friday, April 8.

“I’m ecstatic,” said Bobbie Gale Bonds, assistant professor for Special Education Hearing Impairment in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership. Bonds teaches ASL classes and is also a sponsor of the ASL club on Radford University’s campus.

“Because Radford University is the only university that educates teachers for the deaf and hard of hearing in the state, I believe it’s going to open doors all over campus for students to learn ASL,” Bonds said. “And it should rightfully be here to train our teachers, cohorts and professional peers.”

Bonds and other Virginia educators believe the new law will lead to increased enrollment in ASL courses at the high school level, now that those credits can be applied to foreign languages. Schools all around Virginia already teach ASL as a second language. Locally, those schools include Blacksburg High School, Franklin County and Roanoke City.

“In my opinion, it makes a difference for everyone to take it in high school,” Bonds said. “I think everyone should take it at some point in their lives. It’s such a benefit to their cognition and to their multilingualism and culturalism that I don’t think they can ever discount ASL in high schools as a second language.”

RU already accepts incoming ASL credits, as the university has no set entrance requirements for foreign languages, but according to RU’s Admissions website it is recommended that incoming students have three to four units of a foreign language in high school. Although the incoming credits are accepted, ASL can’t be taken as a foreign language to graduate from the university.

That could change in the future, according to Bonds.

“We have proposed that ASL become a minor here,” Bonds said. “If that passes, then people that are not in special education or not in deaf and hard of hearing, not in education, could also

take those courses ... and obtain that minor, which depends on what their major is, how much of a difference that will be in their career.”

Bonds noted that without ASL as a minor, many students are, in a sense, cut off from the ASL courses. Most students use their elective credits for requirements, even though ASL courses count for many electives.

“For the deaf education program, they are part of the required program of study,” said Ellen Austin, professional faculty and co-director of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Grant. “Our deaf educators have to take ASL one, two, three and four.”

Currently, there are about 80 students enrolled in ASL classes at RU. Students on campus have plenty of opportunities to be exposed to deaf culture as well as to learn and practice signing through the ASL club and weekly “silent gatherings.”

The new law allowing foreign language credits for ASL will take effect on July 1, 2011.