Survey of Student Interest in Foreign Languages

At the end of the 2006 fall semester the curriculum committee surveyed a broad cross section of HMC students about their interest in studying foreign languages. The committee was interested to learn

- what languages students wished to study;
- what background did they already have in foreign languages, and in particular the language(s) they expressed interest in studying;
- were they interested in studying abroad, and if so whether they hoped to study in a non-English-speaking country; and
- how scheduling obstacles might be overcome.

“I really wish I had the time to study languages. It’s one of the biggest regrets I have of my college career.”

Their answers suggest that interest in foreign languages is even stronger than we anticipated (82% of 331 respondents expressed interest in one or more foreign language), that roughly 37% of students interested in studying abroad wish to do so in a non-English-speaking country, and that lack of time and scheduling conflicts are the principal obstacles to our students wishing to take foreign language courses. Last year’s modifications to the Humanities and Social Sciences requirements reduce programmatic constraints, but conflicts with technical courses largely remain.

“I chose to attend Mudd over Caltech because of the option to study Japanese at Pomona. I was pretty disappointed when I couldn’t fit it into my schedule until the second semester of sophomore year.”

Some students suggested a novel way around the scheduling obstacle that may provide a uniquely Harvey Mudd approach to studying foreign languages: offer language classes at 7 or 8 pm three days per week, with flexible “language lab” time. In view of the strong interest in Spanish, Mandarin, and Japanese, the committee recommends that the possibility of offering introductory and intermediate classes in these languages be explored.

Details

Students were surveyed in a number of venues, using both paper forms and e-mail. The entire first-year class was surveyed on paper during the final lecture of Physics 23 on December 7, yielding 104 responses; a class of Engineering 59 (primarily sophomores) was surveyed on paper yielding 68 responses, as were Math 165 (14 responses) and Math 13b (28 responses); finally, an e-mail survey was sent to all students, requesting that students who had previously filled out a paper survey not reply, which netted 159 responses. In all, data from 331 surveys were tabulated for the committee by Rachel Howden, who did a wonderful job combining students’ free-form responses into common themes and issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Fraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bio/Chem</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chem</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS/Math</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math/Bio</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undecided</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Survey response by major.
Students from all 4 classes (weighted towards the frosh and sophomores) responded, and all majors were represented, although no attempt has yet been made to correlate responses to either class or intended/actual major.

Language Preferences

“I have been very dissatisfied with HMC’s view toward learning a language. I actually think that they should warn incoming students about this difficulty. If I would have known about it, I may not have come to HMC after all.”

By far the most requested language was Spanish, with 58% of those expressing interest in studying any foreign language including Spanish on their list. This is consistent with trends at the other campuses. Hence, there are many Spanish language classes to choose from, but they meet four days per week and often do not fit into our students’ schedules. A modest majority (60%) of these students already have some background in Spanish.

Roughly the same number of students expressed interest in Chinese (Mandarin) and Japanese (many mentioned both). Perhaps surprisingly—and in contrast with Spanish and French—only one-quarter or fewer of these students already have backgrounds in these languages. Current introductory offerings at the 5C in these languages meet five days per week in the morning (a typical schedule is MWF 9, TR 8:10, for example) making these courses very difficult to schedule.

Other languages were mentioned, as well, but fewer than 10 students indicated interest in Greek, Gaelic, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Hindi, ASL, Farsi, Urdu, Polish, Persian, Kurdish, Yiddish, Kiswahili, Norwegian, and Danish.

Study Abroad

The form used with first-year students included a question about study abroad that was not present on the other forms: Are you interested in studying abroad? If so, are you interested in studying in a non-English-speaking country? Of the 99 responses, 56% were definitely interested, 14% might be interested, and 29% were not interested. Of those interested, 37 (53%) were interested in studying in a non-English-speaking country and half of these already have a significant level of fluency in the appropriate foreign language. In short, a large fraction of the class of 2010 is interested in studying abroad, roughly half in a non-English-speaking country.
How Could HMC Facilitate Foreign Language Study?

“They’re not stressed at all, even though most people come in to college wanting to continue their high school language. Those that want to go abroad (often to a place that speaks that language) also want to continue their study. This is rarely possible (I wonder how many people take more than a semester or two of a language).”

Students suggested a number of interesting ways that the college might encourage foreign-language study.

- By far the most commonly suggested approach was for HMC to offer foreign language courses (54 respondents). One way suggested to manage this would be to have 2 visiting professors who teach two different languages, and to have students vote biennially on which two languages would best satisfy their needs and interests.

- Restructuring requirements in Humanities and Social Sciences was suggested by 25 students, including allowing foreign languages to count as on-campus humanities courses or to count more than once in the distribution. [Note however, under the revised H/SS requirements a student can satisfy distribution requirements with a total of 4 courses, leaving 6 off-campus courses that could be dedicated to a foreign language.]

- Having language groups, tables, or events. (17)

- Addressing the scheduling and workload issues of foreign language courses, which meet either four or five times per week. Perhaps we could coordinate with the other colleges to have language courses offered at different times, or to meet fewer times per week. Perhaps awarding more credit for language courses might encourage some students. (17)

- Making it possible for students to take foreign language courses in the first year (11); making it possible to begin taking a foreign language in the spring (18). Many students points out that taking a year off in the study of a foreign language hurts retention and progress.

- Increasing the visibility of foreign languages. For example, encouraging students to take placement exams when they arrive, providing information on how to schedule language courses around the Mudd curriculum, and holding information sessions about foreign language study.

“In a quest for interdisciplinarity and increased globalization, HMC needs to produce graduates who can communicate on multiple levels.”

Although no time of day would work with all students’ schedules, a great many students suggested more classes in the afternoon and evening would help. Scanning the fall offerings of introductory language courses over the past two years reveals that only four of 53 classes (two French and two Spanish) were scheduled predominantly in the afternoon, although a few courses meeting MWF in the morning had TR sessions in the afternoon. No language courses were offered in the evening. Intermediate courses were scheduled in essentially the same pattern, as well.

Computer science students are well served by the strong emphasis on morning language courses, insofar as their core courses are held in the afternoon. Furthermore, afternoon courses frequently conflict with laboratory courses. Some language faculty—particularly those with small classes—are willing to accommodate Mudd students’ scheduling conflicts, allowing them to miss a meeting per week if it conflicts with a required (laboratory) course, or to attend an alternate section on the day having the conflict. It may be worth surveying the language faculty to ascertain how widespread this option is. Advisors would do well to encourage students to approach language professors to find out if such an accommodation is possible.
Conclusion

It comes as a surprise to no one that our students face significant challenges in seeking to schedule foreign language courses. At the introductory level, these courses meet four or five times per week, predominantly in the morning, and our core schedule is simply incompatible. Last year the Humanities and Social Sciences department eliminated Humanities 2, opening the possibility for students to take language courses in their second semester. However, most two-semester introductory language sequences begin in the fall. Therefore, students seeking to begin a new foreign language cannot do so in their second semester. On the other hand, students with at least 2 years of high school language are generally able to skip the first semester course and join the introductory sequence in their second semester. In the current semester one student is taking first-semester Japanese, three students are taking third-semester language courses (Spanish and French), one student is taking fourth-semester German, and one student is taking French 13 (which is a conversation class worth 3/4 units).

Table 4 shows the enrollment of our students in beginning, intermediate, and advanced courses in the Joint Language Program in fall 2006 and spring 2007. All told, our students took 130 semesters of foreign language, 58% at the introductory level, 29% at the intermediate level, and 12% at the advanced level, with Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish drawing the most student interest. These numbers are encouraging; our upper-class students are often finding ways to squeeze in a language course. However, we believe it is well worthwhile considering how to make foreign language study more available to our students.

Within the confines of the current curriculum, perhaps the most promising way to make language study possible for a slice of our students is to offer introductory courses in the evening. These might begin at 6 pm, 7 pm, or 8 pm and could run Monday through Thursday (to be consistent with language offerings currently on the books). A possible format might include three weekly meetings, supplemented with computer-based practice time. Whether these courses should be offered by adjuncts or tenure-track members of the Humanities and Social Sciences department—or by faculty at the other campuses within the existing Joint Languages Program—we leave as an open question. However, we believe that institutions are given $10,000 credit by the Joint Language Program for mustering a language instruction course and this may cover most if not all of the cost of offering the courses. Consequently, we recommend that a pilot program be explored by the fall of 2008.

"[Foreign language study] really needs to be more encouraged and easier for a student to do, especially with globalization and our emphasis on realizing the impact of our work on society. That this survey was sent out makes me confident that other people are of the same mind—thanks!"