

Portuguese Studies at the University of Wisconsin

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In its most recent newsletter (Spring 2004), the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) reported a record high number of post-secondary students in the U.S. who are studying a foreign language. According to the findings of the MLA's fall 2002 survey of foreign language enrollments in U.S. colleges and universities, overall enrollments in foreign languages have risen by 17% since 1998, with enrollments in Portuguese increasing 21.1%, from 6,926 in 1998 to 8,385 in 2002. This is a heartening statistic that corroborates anecdotal evidence regarding the growth of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies in the United States, but it must be taken with a grain of salt. While the percentage increase of students enrolled in Portuguese classes is certainly noteworthy, the total number of students in these programs continues to be significantly less than those who opted to study such "mainstream" European languages as Spanish, French, German or Italian. In comparison to these languages, Portuguese remains in the category of a less commonly taught language within the U.S. academy and, like our colleagues who specialize in other areas where less commonly taught languages are spoken, researchers and teachers who concentrate on the Lusophone world must spend a good deal of their time and energy seeking ways to attract more students to their field of study.

The relatively low overall number of students enrolled in Portuguese is due in part to the fact that many colleges and universities do not even offer courses in the Portuguese language. It should also be noted that Portuguese is not a language that is commonly taught in U.S. high schools. Undergraduate students who wish to study Portuguese at the college level first must choose to attend an institution where it is offered and then, after finding their way to the Portuguese program, generally must start their study of the language at the elementary level. Likewise, graduate students who need the language for their research in fields such as history, sociology, political science or anthropology must also usually begin with the very basics.

This is the case, at least, at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, where most students who choose Portuguese have had little first-hand exposure to the cultures of the Lusophone world. As Wisconsin and the upper mid-west in general cannot draw upon a heritage community of Portuguese speakers, the great majority of our students start out as true beginners in the language. The program at Madison is large, however, and has enjoyed a national reputation for more than five decades. Its standing regularly helps to attract undergraduate students with some high school study-abroad experience in either Portugal or Brazil, and the M.A. and Ph.D. programs in Portuguese draw students from throughout the U.S., as well as from Europe and Latin America. At the U.W., Portuguese is housed in the same department as Spanish, with whom it shares administrative responsibilities, office space and other resources. Unlike Spanish, however, the Portuguese program faces a never-ending struggle to maintain high enrollments in its advanced classes. At a time when the American academy is being racked by budget cuts, it often seems that we are constantly looking over our shoulder, trying to "protect" our terrain. This has led the four full-time members of the Portuguese faculty to continue to invest actively in the language program (our bread and butter, if you will), while developing new course offerings designed to attract a wider base of students, and strengthening and expanding existing links within the university community and beyond.

In general terms, the Portuguese program at the University of Wisconsin—Madison is structured to serve three distinct yet interrelated communities: students enrolled in the undergraduate language program, those who have chosen Portuguese as their undergraduate major, and graduate students who are working toward an M.A. or Ph.D. in Portuguese or in other related fields. The students who make up each of these communities have different needs and expectations that to a large extent determine the courses that must be offered on a regular basis. They do, however, mix

quite freely and it is possible to identify a community that is structured around a common interest in Portuguese and Brazilian studies. As many of our undergraduate majors begin their study of Portuguese in a language class, they study under the supervision of the program's graduate students, who are responsible for the teaching of first- and second-year Portuguese. Moreover, many upper division courses in literature and culture often include both advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students.

While we have succeeded in maintaining a dynamic program informed by a shared sense of community, the U.W. Portuguese faculty is aware that the boundaries of this community can and must be expanded. For this reason, we have recently embarked on a project of creating new courses that incorporate the latest technologies and draw on current, interdisciplinary approaches to teaching about the cultures and the history of the Portuguese-speaking world. In order to attract a greater number of students, most of these classes will be offered in English, with additional weekly class meetings in Portuguese scheduled for our undergraduate majors. To date, the experience of teaching literature classes in translation has proved successful in bringing more undergraduates to the study of the language. After a taste of what the Lusophone world has to offer, several students have chosen to enroll in Portuguese language classes. At the same time, students in our beginning language classes who have not and most likely will not develop the advanced skills that would enable them to read complex and sophisticated texts in Portuguese have also taken advantage of these new courses. As we expand our course offerings to include classes in film and civilization, an even larger number of cross-over students is expected. At the graduate level, we continue to offer classes taught exclusively in Portuguese, but have also expanded our seminar offerings to include topics taught in English whenever appropriate.

In our language program, we have begun collaborating with the University of Wisconsin campus at Green Bay, to whom we now send a first-year language class via Interactive Video Technology (ITV). We have also worked with the CIC (Committee on Institutional Cooperation) and Michigan State University on the development of an on-line course for second-year Portuguese. While such a course will not substitute traditional face-to-face instruction at Madison, it is expected that other CIC institutions may find it a helpful way to free up resources and expand their Portuguese offerings. Finally, beginning in the spring of 2005, we will offer a special second-year class in Business Portuguese, thereby serving the needs of another distinct constituency on the U.W. campus.

These new projects have been directly sponsored or supported by various offices of the university's administration and by the Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian Studies Program (LACIS). Members of the Portuguese faculty at the university are all affiliated with LACIS, an area studies program that receives federal Title VI funding. In addition to providing financial support for graduate students from other programs in the humanities and social sciences to study Portuguese, the Title VI program also funds our bi-annual summer institute in Intensive Brazilian Portuguese. LACIS is but one of several federally-funded Title VI programs on campus that provides financial assistance for research and teaching about the Portuguese-speaking world. In addition, the university's African and European area studies programs have also supported faculty research and teaching in the field of Lusophone studies, as has the Women's Studies Program, with whom we have recently established a cross-listed class on Brazilian Women Writers.

It is clear that Portuguese can no longer be considered marginal to the major questions that inform research into the cultures, history and politics of Europe, Latin America, Africa and, to a lesser extent, Asia. In a world that has become increasingly, yet unevenly, globalized and transnational, we are being asked to rethink traditional boundaries and ties. At the University of Wisconsin—Madison, this combination of forces has led the Portuguese faculty to seek out new ways of collaborating with colleagues in other disciplines, both in the U.S. and abroad. We actively encourage our undergraduate majors to acquire experience through study abroad and, every year, more and more of this population has taken advantage of the university's annual and semester-long programs in Coimbra, Portugal and in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. These and other exchange programs have also led to greater interaction between the Madison faculty and graduate students and our colleagues in Brazil and Portugal.

In the coming years, key critical concepts emerging from the practices of cultural studies and postcolonial studies will provide us with fresh approaches to the study of the diverse cultures that make up the Portuguese-speaking world. At the same time, we strongly believe that students and professors working in areas outside of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies can gain important insights as to the workings of their disciplines when confronted with theories developed on the Lusophone world. At the University of Wisconsin—Madison we are, therefore, committed to expanding the boundaries of our teaching and research so that both the faculty and the students may take advantage of and contribute to these new dialogues that promise to shape the future of our shared academic enterprise.