

When Keith Busby was hired to chair the University of Oklahoma's department of modern languages, literatures and linguistics in 1988, his academic specialty was not even required for non-majors in the College of Arts and Sciences. The largest college on campus had dropped foreign language as a degree requirement in 1978, and understandably, the department of modern languages had dwindled in the aftermath.

Almost immediately after his arrival, however, OU responded to a comprehensive study revealing a definite need for a return to higher standards in mathematics, science and foreign language study. The College of Arts and Sciences restored its language requirement in 1988. The University-wide requirement of elementary language proficiency for entering freshmen was mandated for fall 1990.

Since arriving, Busby has shepherded a departmental renaissance, including the addition of four new faculty members. Counting graduate assistants, the teaching population now totals approximately 60, all involved with the rejuvenation of language study.

"There is a trend back toward language study and the humanities in general," says Busby. "Despite all the technological changes occurring in the past 50 years, there is no reason that the basic function of the University—as a place where both scientific and humanities subjects are taught—should change."

Today OU students in modern languages are offered their choice of French, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Japanese and Chinese. The British-born Busby speaks or reads seven languages.

He attributes his success in part to a headmaster who was either "a fool or a great psychologist." When young Busby verbalized hopes of teaching French at a university, the teacher laughed. When told those plans also included Oxford, Busby recalls, the man "rolled around on his study floor laughing."

Hailing from Banbury, a little town just north of Oxford, Busby earned his bachelor's degree in French from Mag-

dalén College at the University of Oxford and a Ph.D. in medieval studies with a concentration in French medieval literature from the University of York.

Busby was teaching medieval comparative literature under a joint appointment with the universities of Utrecht and Leiden when the Netherlands began cutbacks at the universities. The resulting precarious job security, even among tenured positions, led the well-published Busby to Norman. His Dutch wife José Lanteris also teaches at OU as a visiting assistant professor in English, specializing in

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modern British and Anglo-Irish literature.

Each semester, the Englishman typically conducts a medieval French course for graduate students. Another rewarding experience was teaching medieval literature to honors students from outside the department. "They were a delight," he remembers.

"I have watched students progress from the beginning to the advanced level in the Netherlands. It's one of the great satisfying things about being a teacher when you see that interest awakening slowly. You can practically see them wondering, 'Do I really want to do this?' Then the next week you see that conviction getting a little stronger until eventually they'll bite the bullet and do it."

Busby believes there are "utopian" misconceptions about the purpose of language study.

"The function of the language requirement is not—from my point of view, anyway—to teach you to read a menu in a French or Mexican restaurant. To be quite frank, you're not going to speak fluent French or Spanish after three semesters.

"But it does introduce you to the fact that there are other ways of doing things, of seeing the world. The language courses aren't solely grammatical; we don't just teach you to say 'hello-goodbye' in the language. In each course there is some element of the culture."

He maintains that students simply cannot study a language without learning a great deal about its people. For instance, in countries of non-European culture, such as Japan, the amount of Japanese learned in three semesters will not get anyone through a board meeting with a Japanese firm. However, learning how things are done in Japan could be extremely helpful.

"If you can't speak the language when you go to a foreign country, but you make an effort—even if you end up speaking English—having made that effort puts the whole relationship on a completely different footing. Going in and acting as if you expect everyone to speak English is really a gross discourtesy.

"Also," he continues, "there is an enormous sense of satisfaction at being able to communicate in another language. It's a tremendous feeling when you speak to someone, and they actually understand, and they speak back, and you can understand. The structure of other languages teaches us a lot about our own language. There are different word orders and ways of saying things, and it's really a type of mind-broadening. And," he adds flatly, "any student who comes to the University and doesn't want to have his mind broadened shouldn't be here."

That attitude is reflected in Busby's sentiment about his discipline. "We can turn out engineers or social scientists, but I'm sure they'll be *better* engineers and *better* social scientists if they have a broader educational base. They'll probably be better human beings, too."