Cultural Exchange

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Furman’s Language House provides students an optimal living and learning experience — while bringing the world a little closer to campus.

An academic course that meets in a college dorm? Post-it Notes bearing foreign words stuck on all your kitchen appliances? Sharing a bathroom with your teaching assistant? Greeting your roommates in the morning by saying “Guten Tag” or “Hola”? Having your grades based, not on quizzes or tests, but on the way you live your life?

These are just a few of the ways that Furman students and faculty are breaking out of the mold of the traditional college course in the Furman University Language House. For students in all foreign languages taught at Furman, the opportunity now exists for linguistic immersion, an optimal language-learning experience that previously was available only during study abroad. With the invaluable support of teaching assistants from all corners of the globe, Furman students have a place where they can recreate some of the benefits of living abroad — most particularly, daily practice in using Chinese, French, German, Japanese and Spanish.

On-campus linguistic immersion is not a new concept in American higher education. It has existed for decades in some form or another at a variety of colleges and universities. The model institution in this regard is probably Middlebury College in Vermont, whose summer language schools have had students signing its no-English pledge for years. The native-language “informant” who lives with students to serve as a linguistic and cultural resource is a key element in such programs.

What sets the Furman program apart is the integration of the Language House living experience with a four-credit hour academic course in contemporary foreign culture. While the specific focus of the course may vary from language to language and year to year, the idea is to create a context for practice in the target language. “We wanted the Language House to have an academic component; we want our students to take it seriously,” says Jane Chew, professor of German and director of the Language House in its initial two years.

Students agree to live in the Language House for an entire academic year, during which they are also enrolled in the culture course that meets weekly from September to May. The concept meshes neatly with Furman’s effort in recent years to introduce courses that feature an experiential element and take learning outside the traditional classroom environment. The Language House’s experiment in engaged learning goes a long way toward blurring the distinction between classroom and dorm room, study time and downtime.

For the nearly 100 students who have lived in Furman’s Language House since its opening in September 1998, the living-learning combination has exerted a powerful draw. Says Kate Hamel, a biology major and premedical student from Santa Maria, Calif., “I took Spanish for three years in high school. I like to keep it up so I won’t forget it. I think it will be valuable in the health care field.”

The Department of Modern Languages and Literatures (MLL), sponsor of the Language House, had long dreamed of providing this kind of opportunity for its students. But the lack of suitable space for such a program was a major obstacle — until the North Village residential complex, which opened in 1998, was proposed.
Furman president David Shi was an early supporter of including a living-learning center in North Village. He says, "The concept of a holistic living-learning environment enabling our students to immerse themselves in the study of a foreign language was a perfect fit with Furman's commitment to engaged learning." The availability of funds from The Duke Endowment for start-up costs made the dream a reality.

An MLL committee met with the architects of the project several times over a period of months to create a space that would foster language learning. One of the four person residential units in the apartment-style North Village was configured not as living quarters, but as a classroom and study center to be used exclusively by Language House residents in adjacent apartments.

The result is a space that can support multiple activities. A spacious seminar room for classes also serves as a cinema several times a month, thanks to the big-screen television in the corner, complete with a VCR capable of running American and foreign video formats. A smaller "club" room provides a more intimate setting for informal conversation, watching videos, or foreign-language broadcasts through the SCOLA network. A kitchen and dining area is used frequently as students prepare meals for in-class dining or coffee for study breaks. And on one end of the library/computer lab, students can select copies of magazines such as Paris-Match or Stern to read at the broad study table, while students on the other end use one of four computer workstations to search the World Wide Web for foreign language news.

The supervising faculty working with each Language House group have dispensed with conventional quizzes and tests, and classes may meet as naturally in a Chinese or German restaurant as in the seminar room. Jon Howarth, a sophomore computer science major from Florence, S.C., appreciates how the Language House course offers something different. "It's not a standard course where you learn and then are tested," he says. "Here you learn and then apply it directly to a situation. You use the vocabulary, talk about a topic, make comparisons, things like that."

Christina Buckley, a supervising professor in Spanish, found that her most successful Spanish House students began to flourish when they realized that they were being encouraged to learn for the sake of learning. "It seemed to us that they developed along the way a much deeper understanding of what liberal arts really means and a much stronger sense of enrichment and fulfillment through self-motivation and guided independent study," she says. And students come to realize that in the final analysis, they get out of the course what they put into it.

Approximately 100 Furman students have taken part in the Language House program since it began in 1998. Representing the five languages in Furman's 1999-2000 Language House are, from left, Melissa Rekas '00 (Spanish), an economics major from Columbia, Md.; Jon Howarth '02 (German), a computer science major from Florence, S.C.; Kelly Davidson '01 (French), a French major from Lawrenceville, Ga.; Hiroki Komoto '01 (Japanese), a biology major from Gainesville, Ga.; and Elizabeth Shen '02 (Chinese), a political science/Asian Studies major from Roebuck, S.C.
constant learning. If you try to speak and make an effort to improve, you’ll be amazed at how much you learn. It keeps coming back to you throughout the entire year. You won’t have to look up as many words. Each week you feel more and more comfortable.” Laughing, he agrees that living in a foreign language can present challenges. At first, he says, he and his roommates “were making up German-sounding words” to communicate; as time passed, the words came much more easily.

The Language House can function either as a supplement or as a substitute for the kind of experiential learning that takes place during Furman’s programs abroad. Like the study abroad programs sponsored by Modern Languages and Literatures, Language House is open to majors and non-majors alike. Some students choose to live in the Language House when other academic requirements make it difficult to be away from campus for a term. Others use it to prepare for or extend the study abroad experience. Howarth and Larkin used their year in the German House to beef up their language skills in preparation for their trip to Bonn this fall. Another group of four who bonded together in Versailles last fall will spend this year sharing a French House apartment.

And for international students, whose enrollment at Furman represents their own brand of study abroad, Language House has been a natural place to find a niche in the company of American students who are interested in foreign cultures.

Betti Rösszer, a former vice president of Furman’s International Student Association, just completed her senior year as a resident of the German House. In addition to the chance to practice her German outside the traditional classroom, she found the cross-cultural composition of the 1999-2000 German House to be especially invigorating. Other than the American residents, the house featured students from Bulgaria, the Philippines, Sweden, and Betti herself, who hails from Környe, Hungary.

Hiroki Komoto, a rising senior majoring in biology, grew up in Gainesville, Ga., but learned Japanese from his parents. For him, the advantage of the Japanese House was the opportunity to maintain and share his foreign language skills as well as to increase his knowledge of Japanese culture: “In case I go to Japan, I want to be able to communicate with my relatives there.”

Most everyone agrees that the heart and soul of the Language House are the Language House Assistants, or LHAs. These native speakers are chosen each year to assist the supervising faculty as teaching assistants in the classroom, as well as to promote and maintain use of the language outside of formal class time. The LHAs are typically three to five years older than the residents of the Language House and are pursuing master’s-level study in their home countries.

Each LHA lives in an apartment with students studying his or her native language. In addition to the teaching responsibilities of the Language House course, LHAs are also in charge of organizing extracurricular activities open to Language House residents and non-residents alike. In 1999-2000, these activities included a film series in French and German, presentations on the European Union, a regular campus radio show broadcast in French (featuring French popular hits), and weekly informal gatherings at the University Center’s lakeside Tower Café.

These new opportunities for using foreign languages on campus come on top of others that have existed for years, such as the weekly language tables in the dining hall, but the presence of native speakers who are actively involved in promoting the use of their native tongue has brought a new vitality to old traditions. And yes, the LHAs do make appearances in conventional classrooms. They audit courses in a variety of disciplines and are often invited to be guest speakers in language and culture courses, where they share their talents and knowledge with a larger Furman audience.

Most Furman students in the program cite their association with the LHAs as the most beneficial aspect of Language House. Adam Baslow, a probable business/Spanish major from Vero Beach, Fla., shared an apartment with Jorge Jiménez Ramirez, a Spanish LHA from Madrid. “I’ve learned a ton from him. He’s a wealth of Spanish knowledge,” Baslow says, adding that Ramirez often took the time over afternoon coffee to explain and analyze some of the more subtle points of Spanish thought and behavior.

Ramirez, who has an M.A. degree in teaching Spanish as a second language, enjoyed the experience as well. “The students can learn more in Language House than in other classes if they really try. Many little things come out: food, music, informal expressions, even ‘bad’ expressions! It’s very important; they’ll need it in Spain!” The LHAs often work one-on-one with students as they research and write their class projects, helping them track down useful sources of information, offering suggestions on grammar and vocabulary,
The impact of the Furman Language House extends far beyond the students who live there; it has enriched campus life in general. For years the University’s study abroad programs have sent students around the world. Now the world is coming to roost in North Village, creating a true foreign exchange.

Some of the LHAs who have worked in the Language House in its first two years were recruited using contacts established through Furman’s study abroad programs. The happy result is that friendships formed on one side of the world may continue in succeeding years on the other.

For instance, Betti Rüsszer was delighted when a friend she had made in Bonn, Cornelia Graebner, became the 1999-2000 German assistant. And Gaëlle de Carmantrand, whose family has served as host to several Furman students in Versailles, enjoyed seeing some of them again when she came to live in the French House. This fall, back in France, she’ll be looking forward to greeting many of her Furman friends when they come to her hometown for the term.

The only problem: everybody going to France wants to live with the de Carmantrands!

The Language House Assistants, who live in the residence halls and serve as teaching aides, are considered the heart and soul of the program. In 1999-2000, they were (from left): Gaëlle de Carmantrand, Jorge Jiménez Ramirez, Cornelia Graebner, Yanhong Zhu and Masakiyo Fujita.

An international view of Furman

What’s it like to come to a small, private American college when you’re accustomed to large, public universities in Europe or Asia? The Language House Assistants from the 1999-2000 session offer their impressions:

Gaëlle de Carmantrand (Versailles, France)
Gaëlle was surprised by the electronic equipment American students have: a television, a VCR and a computer with Internet connection in every room! She was also amazed by the working conditions for students compared to France, where, she says, “You have to stand in line for two hours to get into the library, then stand in line for two more to get a book, only to find out it’s not the one you need.” She was also impressed that American students were willing to speak to her and to each other in a foreign language. “They have great motivation. In France even our English teacher never spoke English with us outside of class.”

Masakiyo Fujita (Hiroshima, Japan)
“Massa” was struck by the beauty and small size of Furman’s campus. He found it an easy place to make friends and to meet people, noting that at his university in Japan no students live on campus, because there are no residence halls. In his free time, Massa enjoyed playing soccer and traveling to points as distant as Washington, D.C., Key West, Fla., and New Orleans. Because he was the only LHA who owned a car, he was much in demand. “Massa is our lifesaver!” proclaimed one of his colleagues.

Cornelia Graebner (Bonn, Germany)
Perhaps because Cornelia had already spent a year abroad in England, she was surprised by Americans’ reactions to her. “Americans are not really used to foreigners,” she says. “If you are a foreigner, people think you’re from another planet.” But she found ways of breaking down barriers, particularly by helping to organize such well-received extracurricular activities as the International Student Association poetry reading and a program on current issues facing the European Union. Like all LHAs, she was somewhat taken aback by the lack of public transportation in Greenville and by Furman’s dry campus. But she’s looking forward to seeing many of her Furman friends when they come to Bonn for fall term.

Jorge Jiménez Ramirez (Madrid, Spain)
“This was a very good year,” says Jorge, beaming as usual. Although, as he says, “I came to another world, another country, another culture,” living with Americans was much easier than he thought it would be. Of course, there were differences to discover. He was surprised, for example, by American attitudes toward energy use. He says that for the first month he was constantly walking around the apartment after his roommates had left, turning off the lights, the television and the CD player. But he enjoyed the opportunity to work and interact with American students in preparation for a career teaching Spanish to foreigners.

Yanhong Zhu (Shanghai, China)
The opportunity to take classes alongside Furman students enabled Yanhong to discover that some of her preconceptions about Americans were not quite accurate. “I thought the States would be like ‘Growing Pains,’ that the students would never study and only party and have fun.” She found that professors do indeed give lectures and plan their syllabi in advance, and she was “amazed” by the library: “The books are so well-ordered, interlibrary loan is so neat, and the library Web pages connect to so many other sources of information.” So pleased is Yanhong with American education that she has decided to prolong her studies abroad by enrolling in the East Asian Studies program at the University of Southern California.

— William Allen

William Allen, who has taught French at Furman since 1987, earned his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina.