

## 2. Persian Foreign Language Requirement Policy at The University of Texas, 2009–

UT Austin's Department of Middle Eastern Studies announced support early in the Fall 2009 Semester for a new foreign language requirement in accordance with which undergraduate students would fulfill their requirement in Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, or Turkish through successful completion of two semesters of language study consisting of 90 classroom contact hours each. Because of essential differences among Semitic, Ural-Altaic, and Indo-European languages and because of the significant difference in learning difficulty between Persian and most other languages, this brief position paper addresses only Persian.

- The proposed new one-year system promises to work well with Iranian heritage students with prior Persian listening and speaking experience. A new six-credit course would enable them to achieve intermediate-high reading skills after 90 classroom contact hours and 150+ hours of self-study and proceed to so-called third-year or advanced Persian courses should they so desire. However, a new Persian for Iranian Heritage Students course—a motivating factor in the writing of the just completed Persian Reading and Writing textbook (Dunwoody Press, 2009)—antedates the new plan and would work just as well in the current scheme. That is say, Iranian heritage students would take the special course in a fall semester and proceed to Second-year Persian 2 or Third-year Persian in the spring. The only possible drawback to a new heritage Persian course might be that when some Iranian heritage students discover that they can receive a maximum of only six credit hours of 'A' grades in the new system instead of 16 or 18 'A' credits in the current system, they might think twice about participating in the new course to fulfill a foreign language requirement.

- The new system would also have no effect on courses beyond foreign language requirement courses, although Persian Studies may need to offer another new course between the new two-semester sequence and advanced Persian courses formerly offered as Third-year. Even in the current system, about half of the students participating in PRS 329 Third-year Persian do not have the reading and listening skills expected of students beginning a third year of the study of the language. Parenthetically, the issue here may have more to do with a lack of specific instructional objectives and appropriate course materials in some Second-year and Third-year Persian courses.

- As one Persian Studies faculty person has observed, the new system might also make it easier for instructors to deal with highly “motivated students who want to use Persian in their life or studies.” But those students would presumably be studying Persian whether or not they faced a foreign language requirement. For example, such highly motivated students from the Colleges of Natural Science and Engineering have accounted for nearly half of the students in some Second-year Persian courses for some years.

- The most relevant fact is that a college or university foreign language requirement in Persian has served primarily as part of a humanities and liberal arts education for students who need exposure to a foreign world beyond their own and to foreign ways of communicating different from their own, whether or not they plan to use or later use their required foreign language in their lives or studies. Students of Persian need not differ from students who take a required course in Inorganic Chemistry or in History as part of their liberal education even if the prospect of such a course does not particularly appeal to those students. A good Persian language course or a good History course does not preach to a choir, but establishes an efficient learning environment, makes subject matter comprehensible and temporarily interesting, and leaves their students with a new residue in their noggins that may play a role in how they later live whether or not they are ever aware of the effects of their exposure to Persian or History.

- For those students, the current Persian program which involves 810 hours of exposure to Persian significantly exceeds that of the new Persian program, which will involve 540 hours of exposure, as the following simple math demonstrates. PRS 506 = 75 classroom contact hours + 150 self-study hours (i.e., 2 hours of self-study for every classroom contact hour) = 225 hours; PRS 507 = 225 hours; PRS 412K = 60 classroom contact hours + 120 hours of self-study = 180 hours; PRS 412L = 180 hours; the total for PRS 506/7 and PRS 412K/L = 810 hours. PRS 601 =

90 classroom contact hours + 180 self-study hours = 270 hours; PRS 602 = 270 hours; the total for PRS 601/2 = 540 hours.

- As obviously significant as the difference between 540 and 810 hours of exposure to Persian in a foreign language requirement course is, other equally significant facts and issues obtain. For example, under the current system, there is a period of twenty-one months between the first day of PRS 506 and the last day of PRS 412L. Those are twenty-one months during which students likely have Persian on their minds regularly some of the time and have 60 academic weeks in which they can avail themselves of Persian conversation hours, Iranian movie series, Iranian Studies events, and reinforcing off-campus Persian language settings. As for the new PRS 601/2 system, it covers only 30 academic weeks and encompasses only nine months. Such a dramatic decrease in the duration of required exposure to Persian would presumably mean that those students in the new system whose only academic exposure to Persian would consist only of two courses fulfilling their foreign language requirement would absorb less of the Persian language, learn less about its cultural context and content, and emerge from their thirty weeks of Persian study, which DMES has curiously called “intensive,” with fewer incipient language study habits and skills and with significantly less preparedness to use, maintain, or improve Persian skills on their own thereafter.

- DMES has stated the use of “new” methods will make Persian learning in the new system more efficient, thus making it possible for students to develop skills more quickly. But these “new” methods are not new to PRS 412K and PRS 412L, in which the course sequence goals were higher at least in reading and listening than in DMES’s more difficult languages. Accordingly, DMES’s new system, which apparently proposes to treat all four departmental languages equally in terms of terminal instructional objectives, may shortchange Persian students who will leave PRS 602 at a lower level of proficiency than after successful completion of PRS 412L (Persian has always achieved higher levels than ACTFL Intermediate Low in reading and listening skills). Moreover, in the case of students who want to continue the study of Persian after PRS 602, instructors of what is now Third-year Persian and PRS 329 will need to reduce their expectations of the reading and listening skills of entering students or, as mentioned above in passing, add an Intermediate Persian course beyond PRS 602 leading to PRS 329.

- From the vantage point of faculty not party to DMES discussions of its foreign language requirement, the only apparent justification/rationalization for DMES’s new system for its Persian language program relates to budgetary constraints. Even there, insofar as DMES has not apprised all language faculty of those constraints, one could guess that Persian could shoulder its burden with respect to the budget shortfall by means other than reducing the number or hours and length of time in which students of Persian fulfill a foreign language requirement.

- For example, a single fundraising trip to Houston involving a series of meetings with prominent Iranian American families there whose family members have participated in UT’s Persian Studies program could result in checks exceeding Persian’s share of the budgetary shortfall for two or three years.

- Or Persian Studies could present to DMES a detailed program design reducing the number of First-year and Second-year Persian sections by half and doubling their maximum enrollment without a concomitant reduction in reading and listening proficiency expectations.

- No other American university Persian language program approaches the productivity DMES’s Persian Studies. In addition to five intermediate and advanced textbooks and readers of Farsi Persian (e.g., Persian Fiction Reader and Persian Listening [2008]) and two elementary and intermediate Tajiki Persian guides published since 2000, more significant Persian language instructional materials development is now taking place in DMES, e.g., Persian Reading and Writing (2009), Persian Grammar and Verbs (2011), and Persian Conversation (2011/12), and Advanced Persian Reader (2012). In the light of these resources and others in progress, this question may come to mind: Should UT students get more or less for their money in fulfilling their foreign language requirement with Persian?!?

