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UCSB's Department of Religious Studies to Offer Three New Languages

Expanding its already extensive course offerings in Middle Eastern and South Asian languages, the UCSB Department of Religious Studies will add classes this fall in Pashto, Persian, and Turkish.

Combined with existing courses in Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi, and Punjabi, these new languages will "cover the entire region from Morocco to Kashmir," according to Dwight Reynolds, professor of religious studies and director of the UCSB Center for Middle East Studies. The language courses, based in the Department of Religious Studies, also attract students majoring in global or Middle East studies, history, political science, and even ethnomusicology.

The courses in Pashto (spoken widely in Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan), Persian (the official language of Iran and also spoken in Afghanistan and Central Asia), and Turkish will be taught by native speakers visiting UCSB under the auspices of the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program (FLTA).

The FLTA program, sponsored by the Fulbright Commission, the Institute for International Education, and the U.S. State Department, awards scholarships to young English teachers from overseas to refine their teaching skills, increase their English proficiency, and expand their knowledge of U.S. society. "We are thrilled to

be a host institution for the FLTA program, " Reynolds says. "It is an amazing opportunity for our students to meet these teachers, who are not only native speakers but have also just arrived from their countries and can share their experiences."

This is not the first time that UCSB has benefited from the FLTA program. For the past four years, various visiting scholars have taught Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, sponsored by the Center for Middle East Studies, and Punjabi, sponsored by the Center for Sikh and Punjabi Studies.

The course in Pashto is new, and is one of the few being taught in the United States. It represents an extraordinary opportunity, Reynolds says, adding that "having a year of Pashto on your record is the type of expertise that would catch the eye of anyone reviewing applications for the Foreign Service or an international non-governmental organization."

The language courses are interesting in their own right, and can help undergraduates fulfill their language requirements. Arabic courses are particularly popular, especially with global and international studies majors. Three years of basic language study are offered, as well as a number of advanced seminars on special topics.

The other language courses are organized primarily to support research in religious studies, history, political science, global and international studies, or related fields. The Department of Religious Studies, recognized as one of the best programs in the United States for its interdisciplinary study of religion, is also a center for the study of ancient and modern languages, including Aramaic, Coptic, ancient Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, in addition to the Middle Eastern languages. Modern Israeli Hebrew is also taught at UCSB, through the Department of Germanic, Slavic and Semitic Studies.

According to Reynolds, the new language courses also complement the teaching of faculty working on the Middle Eastern and Central Asian regions. One example is Janet Afary, who in July will join the Department of Religious Studies as the Mellichamp Professor of Global Religions. Afary, the only full-time specialist on modern Iran in the University of California system, is the author of "Sexual Politics in Modern Iran" (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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