About 30 American Sign Language students, including several from the Deaf Education Program, sign the national anthem before the MSU men’s basketball game Feb. 20 at the Breslin Center. The first-time event allowed them to practice their skills publicly while also demonstrating that MSU is a Deaf-friendly institution.
RACHAEL ABLER SIGNS with her boyfriend, who is deaf. She signs when she gets frustrated or excited, when she is singing and, recently, with MSU basketball fans as an audience.

She feels highly prepared to teach deaf children, becoming fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) by seeking out high school classes, camps and visits to the Michigan School for the Deaf.

But the deaf education junior’s experiences are rare among peers. Hearing MSU students who study ASL—as an asset or requirement of their future careers—don’t really have readily available opportunities to immerse themselves in the language and culture of the Deaf community.

Until now.
Starting with the fall 2008 semester, the university will offer students the opportunity to live in a residence hall environment where ASL is the primary mode of communication.

This housing option will be located in Snyder-Phillips Hall, which also will become a hub for many academic and cultural events focused on deafness—bringing together students who are deaf and hard of hearing from across campus with others who use or study the language.

ASL is the third most common language in the United States, following English and Spanish. However, MSU’s Living-Learning option will be the only such environment among Michigan’s public universities and one of the most unique in the nation, said professor and Deaf Education Program co-director Harold Johnson.

“This gives us a cultural and linguistic setting that will welcome individuals who sign and allow students to develop their ASL skills above and beyond what can be done through coursework,” he said. “We’re moving ASL out of the classroom and into living.”

Collaboration and Recruitment

Students must have at least a basic ability and commitment to communicate in ASL to live in the dedicated dormitory space, open to all class levels and majors. However, those pursuing degrees in deaf education will be especially encouraged—along with peers studying social work or communicative sciences and disorders—to consider the chance to gain awareness of other disciplines and better understand the life experiences of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Johnson proposed the ASL residential option in collaboration with faculty from the College of Social Science and the College of Communication Arts and Sciences. The group drafted plans, which soon won administrative approval, as a partnership with potential to enhance both their individual programs and the university’s overall efforts to support an inclusive, diverse student body.

“Evidence-based outcomes show that living-learning programs enhance the student experience in significant ways,” said MSU Provost Kim Wilcox. “We are pleased that the collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to establishing the ASL residential option has resulted in Michigan State’s ability to provide this unique educational opportunity.”

Many organizations familiar with the needs of students and the Deaf community were consulted to make the project viable, including MSU’s Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities, the Michigan School for the Deaf, the Michigan Division on Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Michigan Rehabilitation Services.

“People who are deaf or hard of hearing, unfortunately, often feel like ‘outsiders’ on most college campuses, not fitting in or being viewed as ‘disabled’—we want to change that here at MSU,” said Associate Professor Claudia Pagliaro, who joined the College of Education as Deaf Education Program co-director last fall.

She said the ASL living option will show the local, national and international Deaf communities that MSU is a Deaf-friendly environment—and that the university’s deaf education program is worth pursuing. Pagliaro and Johnson believe the prospect will help recruit more deaf students, particularly those interested in math and science, and produce more highly qualified educators.

“This creates a natural, interactive learning environment where residents and those who choose to participate in activities can come and immerse themselves in ASL and broaden their understanding of Deaf culture,” Pagliaro said. “Our deaf education students will be getting a better sense of the children’s worlds.”
they are preparing to teach, which can only have a positive effect.”

Facilities and Activities

Snyder-Phillips was selected because it is fully accessible and was recently re-focused as an on-campus community that values language arts and culture, housing the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities.

The building’s newly remodeled and constructed spaces, including a theater and three-story cafeteria, offer ideal wide-open surroundings for students to comfortably communi-cate in and appreciate ASL. A limited number of reserved rooms, available in both men’s and women’s sections, will be equipped with visual alerting systems and other accommodations upon request.

Meanwhile, the College of Education’s own ASL instructor Marta Belsky has agreed to serve as a full-time coordinator, handling admissions and planning activities such as guest speakers, social gatherings and captioned movies. Snyder-Phillips also could eventually serve as a convenient location for some ASL courses. A grand-opening celebration will be held in September.

“"The best way to learn any language is through continued use in a fun and relaxed environment,” said Kyle Callahan, who applied for the program as he pursues a deaf education major next school year. “This will give both hearing and deaf students alike a place where they can live or go to where ASL isn’t considered strange, but rather celebrated and encouraged.”