

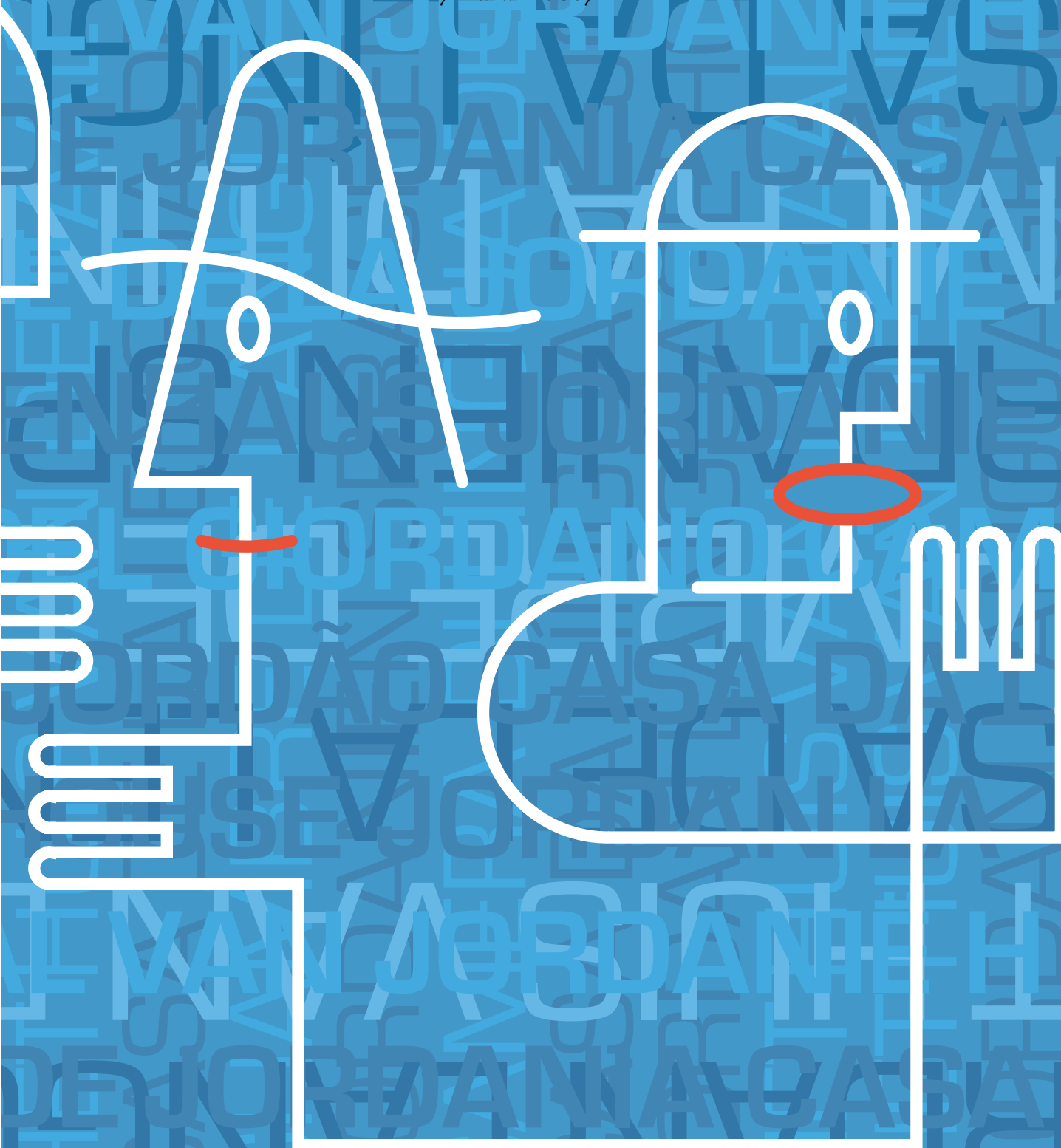
JORDAN FAMILY LAN

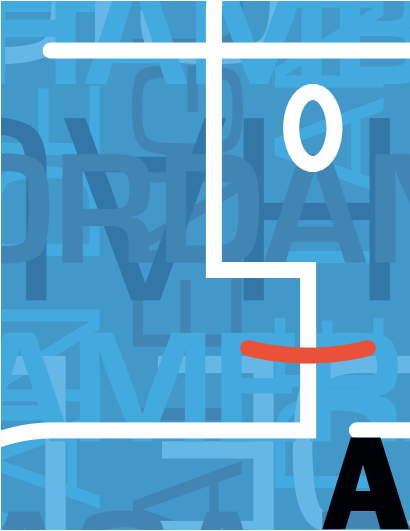


LANGUAGE HOUSE

From the Back of an Envelope to National Leader

by Dara McCoy





As it nears the three-decade mark, the language house program at Austin College may be on the verge of hitting its prime. It has had a fair share of growing pains, including a string of relocations from houses the College acquired to residence halls and even a stint at the local Best Western, that kept language house students and faculty in French, Spanish, and German moving more than a tourist on a trip across Europe.

The program has matured along the way, gaining a new language (Japanese) and building a dedicated language house facility in 1998, integrating the use of new technologies, and becoming a nationally recognized leader by hosting the first national language house conference in fall 2007. Throughout this growth and development, the purpose has remained the same. Austin College's language house program provides a focused, immersive environment in students' target languages that allows them to improve their skills and knowledge every day without the pressure of a classroom or living in a foreign country.

Decoding Languages

In fall 1980, Austin College's first language house term commenced with German. At the time, the language house was held in Thompson House, a Victorian-style home on the corner of Grand Avenue and Brockett Street. Each term the language house rotated between German, French, and Spanish.

Art, books, and other items from the target language and culture were moved in and out of the house. "The language house allows students to make the target language come alive in their daily experiences, in their cooking, cleaning, game-playing, watching cheesy movies or strangely comic game shows, dancing to another culture's music, and listening to other cultures' news, while still residing on the

Austin College campus," said **Patrick Duffey**, professor of Spanish and chair of the Department of Modern and Classical Languages.

To complete the environment, a native speaker of each language lives in the house, and the target language must be spoken in all common areas. **Ed Stemple '83** remembers how his experience in the French House in spring 1981 helped prepare him for a junior year abroad at Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier, France.

"The stay there helped me cross the most important threshold in foreign language development, which is thinking in the new language," Stemple said. "From that point on, French no longer seemed to be code for English, but became a distinctly different way of thinking and communicating. That's a very exciting and eye-opening moment, which is hard to achieve without the kind of immersion that a language house or study abroad program offers."

Stemple's experience is the perfect example of what Austin College's language house program attempts to do for its student occupants, who often are preparing for a study abroad term or international Jan Term trip. According to departmental surveys of Austin College study abroad students, more than 80 percent indicate that living in the language house was the most important preparation for their study abroad experience, Duffey said.

Finding a Permanent Home

A turning point in facilities for the language house came with some bad news in 1994. The language house program, then housed in Coffin Hall, was notified the aging residence hall would be demolished to make room for the new Robert J. and Mary Wright Campus Center, said **Truett Cates**, professor of German. The following year, Cates spent part of his sabbatical visiting language house facilities at Pomona College and Stanford University.

Using Cates' research and ideas from departmental planning meetings, the language faculty proposed building a language house. "I had a drawing I'd made on the back of an envelope on the plane back from California," Cates said. "I scratched it up on the board in the department meeting, and we went from there."

When President Oscar Page visited the family of George Jordan, Sr., a 1915 Austin College graduate, hoping to raise funds for the campus center, he succeeded in raising money, but not for the center. "The president had a list of projects he carried with him when raising money," Cates said. "He showed the Jordans a list of possible projects, and they said tell us more about the language house." The language house went from proposal to an active project with gifts from Edwin B. and Louis Jordan of Dallas and Julia and George R. Jordan of Houston.

At the Jordan Family Language House dedication in October 1998, George Jordan, Jr., summarized the significant contributions by relating that his father's Austin College education helped him through a lifetime that witnessed the Great Depression, World War II, and the beginnings of radio and television. "As the world gets smaller, the need to understand foreign people and foreign cultures grows more

important, not less," he said. "Those who have the benefit of a classic education, those who understand where they came from, have a much better chance of knowing where they're going."

The new facility provided housing for 48 students, room to add Japanese to the program, and the ability to separate German, French, Spanish, and Japanese into four independent "houses" within the building. In 2007, Chinese was added to the Austin College curriculum and will be included in the language house in fall 2008. "Austin College as an institution has given such strong support for many years to the language house program," Duffey said. "We're one of only two colleges in the country with a facility designed specifically to be a language house."

Leading the Pack

Having the foresight to build a dedicated language house almost a decade ago put Austin College's language house program squarely at the head of the pack. That's why Duffey became a little perturbed when he read a 2005 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article about the rising popularity of language houses and Austin College was not listed among the article's examples, he said. At the next National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) conference he attended, Duffey approached NITLE with the idea of holding a language house-specific conference for the 34 to 35 liberal arts colleges with language house programs, he said.

NITLE was interested, and Austin College joined representatives from Furman, St. Olaf, Colorado College, Pomona, and Oberlin to form a planning committee for the conference. In September 2007, Austin College was the host site for the first national language house conference, "Technology and the Language House Curriculum." Faculty from 19 liberal arts colleges attended the NITLE-funded conference that featured sessions on language house configuration, perspectives of students and language house residents, language house and study abroad, and many topics under the umbrella of technology and its use in the language house and language teaching.

Speaking the Language

There's no denying that Austin College's language house program is more immersive than a typical textbook and classroom course. With a native speaker living in their midst, the relaxed atmosphere of home, and numerous technological tools providing a unique learning experience, language house alumni generally sing its praises.

Thomas Rhodes '08 spent two and a half terms in the German house before studying abroad in Vienna, Austria. "You are surrounded by people who are struggling with the same issues as yourself, which makes you less fearful to actually speak and say something incorrectly," Rhodes said. "This prepares you before a baptism by fire when you decide to study abroad."

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Brenna Shay '06 lived in the language house in 2004–2005 and now lives in the Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan. “Hearing Chika, our native speaker, speak Japanese was a constant reminder of how much I didn’t know,” Shay said. “Studying a language is all well and good, but it’s the drive to communicate that generates a passion for learning. For me, Jordan and its residents provided that motivation.”

Motivation also is provided by the fact that the language house is actually an academic course at Austin College. Students are required to do certain assignments, attend meetings, and participate in their weekly “language table” at lunch in the campus dining hall. “There’s a syllabus, and there’s a grade,” Duffey said. “That’s vital because the students take the language house seriously.”

All these components place Austin College in a leadership role among peer institutions that want to improve the quality of language house programs. After the NITLE conference, several institutions expressed interest in developing a language house association, Duffey said. “Austin College is right at the cutting edge of doing this and is a real leader in language house programs.”

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Lesser-Taught Languages: Austin College Courses in Arabic, Hindi, and Persian

From Morocco to Sherman: Experiences of 2004-2005 Arabic Language Resident Yasmine Hasnaoui

Culture Shock: Austin College Language Residents Experience Surprises

Teaching in Japan: Alumni Share Their Experiences

Boot Camp for Techies

Because of the NITLE conference’s focus on technology, Austin College language faculty decided to beef up their technology skills by participating in Pomona College’s 2007 Language Technology Boot Camp. The boot camp was designed to train language house residents, who are native-speaking students living in the language house and assisting students in learning the language.

Austin College sent Lena Krian, German language resident from Mainz, Germany, to Pomona. The Spanish, French, and Japanese residents, as well as several faculty members, participated through teleconference. Most of Austin College’s language residents are placed through the Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program of the Institute of International Education, a type of student exchange program.

The technology boot camp helped Austin College language residents and faculty improve technology skills that could assist in language learning. Sessions on Web 2.0 features like Chinswing and Gabcast; content production through Photo Story, Flickr, and Audacity; and well-known Internet sources like blogs and YouTube were discussed in context of teaching a foreign language.

For instance, Lena Krian helped three students create a comic strip in German. Spanish language resident Lucía Gascue said Spanish students are assigned to post on the Spanish blog at least once a term (www.lamargarita07.blogspot.com). “It makes students more active learners because students are more adept at using technology and actually producing projects,” Duffey said. “The language technology centers or their own computers can be more like studios where they produce things rather than passively absorbing. They’re using the target language in whatever they’re producing.”

High School Teachers Enjoy Benefits of Jordan Family Language House

Austin College students are not the only ones benefitting from immersion experiences in Jordan Family Language House. Nearly 40 Texas high school foreign language teachers of French, German, Latin, and Spanish take part in Austin College’s annual weeklong Summer Foreign Language Institute. The Jordan Family Language House provides housing and workshop space for the program. The teachers speak their target languages at all times during the institute.

The institute, led by Austin College faculty members with the assistance of language residents from Europe and Latin America,

allows the secondary teachers to refresh language skills and to develop cultural and technology resources for their students. Austin College faculty members provide workshops on culture, literature, and technology uses in the curriculum. Films, musical and dance performances, and other activities supplement the workshops.

A grant from the Sid W. Richardson Foundation provided all fees for participants. For information on future institutes, contact Bernice Melvin, dean of Humanities, at bmelvin@austincollege.edu or watch for updates on the Classical and Modern Languages Department Web site at www.austincollege.edu. 