

Special Interest Groups Enhance Your Professional Relationships

BY JULIET MASON

With more than 10,500 members, ACTFL recognizes that finding peers who share like interests can be a daunting task. To help members meet one another and share information, ACTFL has established various Special Interest Groups (SIGs) on topics ranging from Small German Undergraduate Programs to the Teaching and Learning of Culture.

ACTFL currently has 13 active groups. SIGs operate under the aegis of ACTFL and are a vital component of ACTFL's member service activities. They include:

- African-American Students
- Community College
- Teaching and Learning Culture
- Distance Learning
- Film (Cinema)
- Korean
- Language Learning for Children
- Less Commonly Taught Languages
- Portuguese
- Research
- Spanish for Native Speakers
- Small German Undergraduate Programs
- Teacher Development

SIGs work throughout the year to facilitate discussions, share information, provide guidance, and sponsor sessions at the Convention. The SIGs accomplish these goals through online discussion forums found at www.actfl.org/i4a/bb, by distributing information, and by conducting Call for Submissions under ACTFL's Convention Call at convention2.allacademic.com/one/actfl/actfl08. Often members will find that presenting at a SIG session, posting information on a discussion forum, or serving in a SIG leadership role are good ways to gain valuable experience and confidence. Being smaller units, SIGs are often able to offer guidance and support to colleagues.

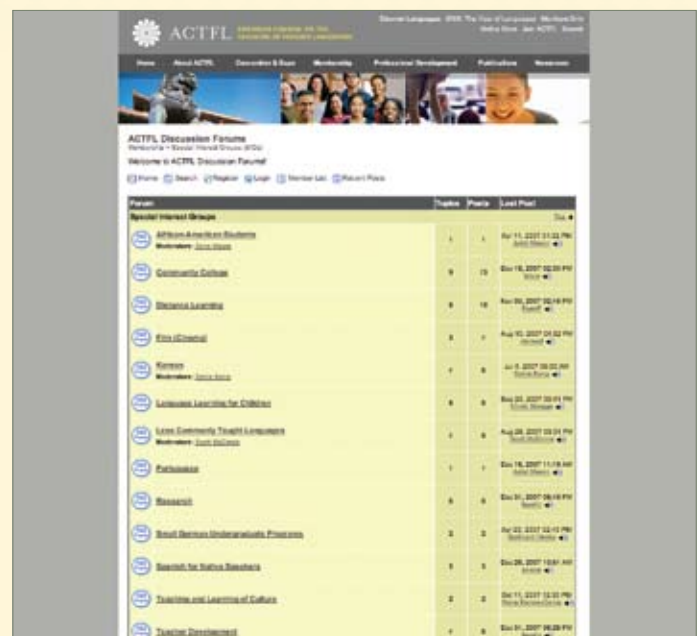
Any member of ACTFL may join a SIG for the duration of their membership. Dues are an additional \$5 per year (per SIG). Funds collected for SIG dues are used to support SIG activities throughout the year. Current members can add a SIG to their membership at: www.actfl.org/i4a/forms/form.cfm?id=34.

Juliet Mason is ACTFL Director of Membership.

Forming a SIG

SIGs may be proposed by any ACTFL member or group of members, or by the ACTFL Board. To be formed, a group has to collect signatures of ACTFL members who support forming the SIG, and write a mission statement for the SIG. The ACTFL membership director works with individuals forming SIGs and brings their request to the ACTFL membership and education committee for review and approval by the ACTFL Board.

Currently, ACTFL has two SIGs working towards forming: Greek educators and Arabic educators. Members who support forming one or both of these SIGs can visit www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3428 to sign the online petition. Anyone with an idea for a new SIG may contact ACTFL Membership Director Juliet Mason, at jmason@actfl.org for more information. SIGs can be formed around any shared interest or need, and often bring members from various settings together—individuals who otherwise might never meet!



What Joining a SIG Has Done for Me and Can Do for You

BY RYAN PITCHER

Six years ago, as a recent hire of Bismarck State College in Bismarck, North Dakota, and being the only full-time foreign language faculty member at the institution, I felt very isolated from other foreign language educators. Prior to coming to North Dakota, I had grown accustomed to the continuous exchange of ideas between language teachers that is such a boon and benefit to one's personal and professional development. I joined ACTFL shortly thereafter with the hope that I could, once again, establish these connections.

As I filled out the online application form, the section regarding Special Interest Groups (SIGs) caught my eye. I joined the Distance Learning SIG primarily because I anticipated that distance learning and teaching would be of importance to someone in my area of the country desiring to grow one's program. I had no experience with teaching or learning at a distance, but I was willing to learn. With that in mind, I looked forward to attending my first ACTFL convention and meeting individuals from whom I could learn the skills and expertise necessary to achieving my goals.

Today, after five years of attending ACTFL conventions and being a member of the SIG, I can say that my original plan has been, and continues to be, a success both on a professional and personal level. I can now provide concrete reasons as to why this is so and offer them as suggestions to anyone who may want to get more out of their ACTFL membership.

Professionally

- **Special Interest Groups make it easier for an ACTFL presentation proposal to be accepted.** SIGs are generally allotted two academic sessions. Only SIG members can submit to these sessions and, therefore, the chances for acceptance are greater. In my experience, these sessions are in a more intimate setting and relieve much of the stress that would accompany presenting before large audiences, while providing the same invaluable professional growth of presenting at a national convention. It is a great addition to any dossier or résumé.
- **Special Interest Groups provide an increased opportunity for leadership service.** SIGs have executive committee positions of Chair, Vice-Chair, and Secretary/Treasurer. Individuals in these positions provide the vision and focus for their SIGs while helping to stimulate discussion among SIG members on issues of common concern. Serving on the executive committee helps me to stay active and current on ACTFL initiatives and topics that are of interest to our members and our profession. In addition, I am able to communicate frequently with our members via the SIG listserv and discussion board.

- **Special Interest Groups foster increased participation in state foreign language organizations.** Being active on a national level makes it easier to be active in state organizations. Much of what we discuss is how, within the framework of each SIG, members are accomplishing ACTFL-sponsored initiatives and responding to common concerns in their local areas. As an active member of my SIG, I better represent my state foreign language association by presenting information gathered at ACTFL at state foreign language meetings and play a role in initiatives such as *Discover Languages*.
- **Special Interest Groups build connections that otherwise would be difficult to establish.** Where else can you discuss with individuals separated by thousands of miles ideas that are of mutual benefit to our students and us? Attending an ACTFL convention, especially for the first time, can be an overwhelming experience. Narrowing the number of attendees down from approximately 6,000 to around the dozens that attend a SIG meeting makes the opportunity to build the much-needed relationships with other teachers more manageable and the convention, as a whole, more enjoyable. I look forward every year to renewing these relationships and friendships that, in some cases, will last long after my teaching career is over.

Personally

- **Serving in a Special Interest Group builds self-worth and instills growth.** By truly being an active member of a SIG, you force yourself, in essence, to leave your comfort zone by moving at a pace that is requisite for maximum personal development and not simply for enjoyment. Sounds a lot like what we require of our students, doesn't it? I now incorporate distance-learning components in my on-campus classes and will soon offer an exclusively online conversation class simply because of active membership in the SIG.
- **Serving in a Special Interest Group instills language learning in others.** Our students are inspired by our commitment. My students, knowing that I go to ACTFL conventions, anticipate trying new methods and techniques related to distance learning.

Today I still live in North Dakota and I still struggle with the lack of a daily exchange of ideas with other foreign language teachers. Unlike six years ago, however, I am a different person and I know where I can go to get help. All for an extra \$5 a year for a SIG membership. Money well spent!

Ryan Pitcher is Associate Professor of Spanish at Bismarck State College and the Chair of the Distance Learning SIG.