

Mercy First to Offer Albanian Language Courses in New York

There are currently more students studying Albanian at Mercy College than at any other college in New York State, according to Alan Hartman, D.M.L., director of Mercy College's Modern Foreign Languages Program (MFLP). Mercy is also the only college in New York that allows students to complete their general education language requirements in Albanian. The MFLP recently added two Albanian courses to the curriculum: ALBA 115 "Albanian for Communication" and ALBA 116 "Communicating in Albanian."

Some of the students who enrolled in at least one of the two Albanian courses that Mercy College's MFLP launched in fall of 2021 include Arnisa Bufaj '24, who grew up speaking what she calls "slang Albanian." She spoke the language with her family but did not know proper grammar or spelling, often having to mix in English words to get her message across. Arti Balija '25, who did not grow up speaking Albanian at home, now wants to be able to communicate with his relatives in Albania. Other students who are enrolled in the program and who did not have any Albanian heritage simply wanted to learn something new.

"Albanian is an important language in our immediate community and an important language in the Balkans," Hartman said. Dobbs Ferry is in the heart of the largest Albanian diaspora in the Americas with an estimated

100,000 Albanian-Americans living in Westchester and the Bronx. Hartman described Albanian as a "very cosmopolitan language" and explained that it is spoken in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and parts of Bosnia, Serbia, Greece and Italy.

After noting how many Albanian-American students attend Mercy, Hartman asked some of them if they would like to formally study Albanian. There was overwhelming interest, so he began exploring the possibility of adding some Albanian courses. "At Mercy, we're able to determine the exact resources that we need and how to best serve our particular student population," he said. "That's different than many other institutions. This program helps us all stand out as the promising scholars and unique academic community that we are."

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Hartman spoke with faculty members at what are likely the only other higher education institutions in the country that teach Albanian—Arizona State University and Utah's Brigham Young University—and the authors of an Albanian language textbook published by the University

of Wisconsin Press. "I've been in touch with everybody in the whole country who is teaching Albanian," he laughed. "There are so few resources out there, and I really didn't know how to proceed at first. All the responses were very enthusiastic."

Soon after starting the search for an Albanian instructor, he was able to hire Mercy College alumna Greta Luka, M.S. '20—a school psychologist and native Albanian speaker who works full-time in a Westchester County public



school—to teach both ALBA 115 and 116. "I loved my experience at Mercy," Luka said. "When I saw that this course was being developed and offered, there wasn't a question in my mind about teaching it."

Like any language course, studying Albanian involves grammar instruction and discussions. Luka has also incorporated projects that require students to explore Albanian culture. She explained that students have responded very positively to the fact that the classes require them to participate in discussions and interact with their classmates, "Students really enjoy the in-person discussion and have expressed so much appreciation for the active learning we do in class. They are hungry to connect with others."

Only five or six months into their formal study of Albanian, students

report that they are seeing gains in language skills already. “When I text my cousins from Albania, I’m spelling words right because I learned how to pronounce them properly,” said Bufaj, who is majoring in computer science. “I used to feel embarrassed when people spoke Albanian to me because I didn’t really understand them and couldn’t respond,” explained Baliya, who is majoring in criminal justice. “But now I’m more at ease because I can communicate in Albanian. The other day, I was able to have a short conversation in Albanian with my neighbor.”

They both feel motivated to continue speaking Albanian. Baliya plans to practice while visiting family in Albania this summer. And Bufaj wants to pursue additional certification as an

Albanian speaker so she can help Albanian immigrants navigate life in the United States. “My parents are immigrants, and I can’t imagine how hard it was for them to learn English when they first came into this country. I know that there’s a rise in immigration from Albania, so I hope to help other Albanians now.”

In addition to their language gains, students are likely growing in ways they do not fully realize. Luka sees learning Albanian as being about so much more than just learning a language. “Research shows that students who come from immigrant backgrounds don’t always feel like they can be the same person at home as they are at school or work because there are two very different cultures and sets of expectations in

those environments,” she explained. “Studying Albanian can allow those two realities to become one. I hope my students never have to see their background and culture as something to hide—and that they can take that confidence with them in whatever they do.”

Given the positive reception to these new courses, Hartman said that Mercy may one day offer an Albanian Studies program, which would enable students to minor in Albanian. “These courses can create a very interesting bridge between Mercy, the local Albanian-American community, and universities abroad such as the University of Pristina in Kosovo,” he said. “There’s more to come.”

