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Traditions and Transitions:
Russian Language Teaching in the United States.
In Celebration of the Career of Dr. Victorina Lefebvre

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In May 2012, the University of California, Irvine’s Humanities Language Learning Program hosted a symposium entitled *Traditions and Transitions: Russian Language Teaching in the United States*. The primary impetus for the meeting was to celebrate the distinguished career of our colleague, Dr. Victorina Lefebvre, who taught Russian language courses at University of California, Irvine since 1984. Her retirement in June 2012 meant the symposium was an opportunity to recognize and thank her for her unflagging decades of hard work for UC Irvine’s students. Victorina Lefebvre, who trained in the USSR in mathematics and physics education (M.A.) and in psychology (Ph.D.), first began to develop teaching materials in 1975-77 for the University of California system for use in Russian language classrooms. Every year, Victorina worked hard at expanding and enhancing her classroom skills through frequent and enthusiastic participation in professional development opportunities, both at UC Irvine and through the UC system-wide Language Consortium. She also toiled tirelessly on more than one occasion to save the program in Russian Studies from being cut completely at UC Irvine. She is an outstanding teacher, superb role model for fellow instructors, and an advocate for our field. Most importantly, she has consistently connected with her students over the years and contributed to their education in many ways.

*Traditions and Transitions* featured presentations by five invited speakers: Thomas Garza, Ludmila Isurin, Olga Kagan, Mark Kaiser, and Jason Merrill. The speakers were asked to address current issues of importance to our field in the context of the symposium’s two goals. First, the symposium aimed to analyze and evaluate the current state of Russian language teaching, in order to raise awareness of central issues. Second, the symposium attempted to offer innovative programmatic and pedagogical solutions to the problems brought about by the new norm of
diminished resources, particularly in Russian programs. The symposium was attended by foreign language instructors from throughout California, who participated in the lively discussion after each talk. During the concluding session, the respondents—Kathleen Dillon and Lora Mjolsness—summarized the various successful approaches to teaching Russian presented at the symposium and stressed the need to bring broader attention to these innovations in order to present other programs with information about responses to challenges in our field.

Three of the papers presented at the symposium appear in this issue of the *Russian Language Journal* in their complete form. They offer various responses to the symposium’s main questions concerning ways instructors and programs can better structure their Russian courses. Thomas Garza, University of Texas at Austin, presented “Keeping it Real: Intensive Instruction and the Future of Russian Language and Culture in U.S. Universities,” which highlights the experiment in intensive Russian language instruction at the University of Texas designed to bring students to functional proficiency at the end of one academic year of instruction. Ludmila Isurin, The Ohio State University, presented “Hits and Misses in Teaching Russian in the U.S.: Triangulation of Instructors’, Students’, and the Enrollment Perspectives.” Her article draws on a study conducted in 2011-2012 at The Ohio State University, which is one of the largest Russian programs in the United States, to assess how the enrollment data and attrition trends are linked with language proficiency, motivational factors in learning Russian, the role of the instructor, perception of the Communicative Method, and the textbook used in the program. Finally, Jason Merrill, Michigan State University, in his article, “Our Russian Classrooms and Students: Who is Choosing Russian, Why, and What Cultural Content Should We Offer Them?” concentrates on how students are using Russian outside the classroom and focuses on practical concerns, such as the types of cultural content that should be delivered in language classes and what percentage of class time should be devoted to them.

Discussion at the symposium focused on several important areas. Participants felt it was important to look at flourishing programs and determine what factors make them successful. Of the programs discussed in these papers, one is an intensive summer language school, another is one of the largest in the country, and one offers an intensive
language track alongside a traditional sequence. Nevertheless, there are a few key factors that link these diverse programs. The main component for a successful program is the role of the instructor to motivate the students to learn. A second important tenet in the articles from this symposium is the importance of finding content that motivates students. Since each Russian program in the U.S. is distinct, the situations described in these articles may not be able to be applied to each and every program in the same way. But each article presents flexible ideas and solutions that can be adapted. If, as instructors, we are to motivate our students, then we must learn to adapt and innovate to ensure that our programs continue to deliver the most effective instruction possible.

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