Dillard University begins offering degree in Japanese

By The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Dillard University this fall will become the nation's first predominantly black school to offer an undergraduate degree in Japanese language and culture.

Academic programs in Japanese are fairly common on the West Coast, where many Japanese immigrants have settled, but they are rare in the South.

Only one Southern college, Brenau Women's College in Gainesville, Ga., offers Japanese as a major course of study, according to the College Board, a college study group. No other Louisiana university offers Japanese.

"We are trying to broaden our curriculum — to internationalize it," said Dillard President Samuel Cook. "Secondly, our desire is to emphasize the fundamental unity of mankind."

The Dillard program will involve four faculty members and will cost about $200,000 a year to run. Some of the money will come from the Japan Foundation of New York, and the university will foot the rest of the bill. Cook said Japan's emergence as an international financial leader has increasingly made the Japanese economy, philosophy and work ethic models for global study.

Cook, a political scientist, became interested in Japanese culture while visiting colleges in Japan that were founded by Methodist missionaries.

Dillard evolved into a university after the 1930 merger of two elementary and secondary schools established for blacks by the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ.

During the 1987 Japanese college tour, Cook became friends with Makoto Fujita, director of the International Center of Kwansei Gakuin University in Nishinomiya, who has an interest in the black culture.

From that friendship grew a program through which ninth-graders at Kwansei Gakuin Junior High come to Dillard to study English for three weeks. About 40 students come each year.

Margaret H. Eskew, a linguist, will direct Dillard's Japanese Studies program. Fujita will be paid by the Japan Foundation to teach at Dillard for a year beginning in April.

Cook acknowledged that Japanese may seem like an exotic language to students who generally prefer more widely used tongues such as Spanish and French.

"It's a noble experiment," Cook said. "We will have to monitor it carefully. If the enrollment is insufficient, we will have to retrench."

But Cook believes that the program will attract more students to Dillard, which now enrolls about 1,550. Courses will be offered in the late afternoon and early evening to allow older students and business professionals to enroll.