

Commitment to the Life of a Scholar

Among the many professors at Utah State University, Maria Cordero stands out as one who is truly dedicated to what she does. Dr. Cordero is an Associate Professor within the Language, Philosophy, and Communication Studies department at Utah State and she can often be found teaching her students about the many different aspects of Latin American cultures. While teaching is one of her main duties she also plays a large roles in research as well as service within the university as well as the community in which she lives.

Research

As a professor at USU, Dr. Cordero enjoys the opportunity to contribute to new literature within her field. As a researcher she has two areas of specialization in particular, namely colonial Spanish American literature and Caribbean Studies. She endeavors to approach the literature and art within these specialties with an interdisciplinary approach examining not only the content in the literature but also the visual aesthetic value that can often be attributed with works of that time period. Her desire is that by approaching the literature in such a way she will be able to “open up the works so that a greater audience can understand and appreciate them.”

This year specifically, she plans on publishing an article in the journal Symbolism that specifically focuses on a Cuban-American artist as well as letters written by Chilean author Pedro de Valdivia that were written during the conquest of America. Another paper that Dr. Cordero is currently working on focuses on the works of a Hatian-Dominican artist that aims to uniquely portray the relationship between women and nature. She has had the opportunity to travel to Haiti and present this research, but she plans on returning in the near future to present a more developed version of the topic to the Hatian Studies Association conference in Cap-Hatien.

She is also currently working on writing a book about the visual art of Cuban-American artist Erman Gonzales. Dr. Cordero became particularly interested in the works of Gonzales because of his use of mixed media in his art. According to Dr. Cordero mixed media isn't just a pencil or charcoal sketch for example, instead he uses ordinary things such as textiles, paper, and fabric in his art. Some of his sculptures even include items such as shoes, wood, and buttons to name a few. She focused on Gonzalez particularly because, "I think that artists that work in that area are trying to draw attention that our society is one of waste and so he draws on those things as a resource for his art. This is actually done in developing countries out of necessity because there is nothing else to work with, but he does it by choice in order to make a statement."

Education

In addition to the different areas of research that Dr. Cordero is involved in she also has a responsibility as a teacher at Utah State University. Dr. Cordero teaches advanced level literature and culture courses that have a large emphasis on Latin American cultures. One of these course in particular is the Hispanic American Culture and Civilization course. She uses this class to help the students also understand how it relates to human rights violations that sometimes occur. Dr. Cordero tried to take an interdisciplinary approach in how she sets up the class and how she presents the material to the students. One way she does this is by using different forms of literature, visual arts, and music to discuss the ways that victims of human right violations have processed these traumatic experiences in order to overcome them.

In Spanish American Literature part one she teaches the students the cultural production of the indigenous people of the Americas as well as the conquistadors. In this class they not only study the literature that exists on this topic, but she also has the students focus on the oral traditions that have shaped the culture. In this class, she tries to help the students to "examine the

gray area between literature and history and how the telling of history is shaped differently by different perspectives.” For those who get minors, another class that she teaches is Intro to Literature and Literary Analysis. In this class she covers the literature of Spain and Hispanic America. She strives to use this upper-division course to help prepare the students to take even more difficult courses.

In each of these classes, Dr. Cordero pays special attention to the way that she presents the information. Her teaching method of choice is to be able to get the students to be more interactive with her rather than just lecturing. To do this she discusses her syllabus with her students each semester so that both she and her students can be happy with what they are learning as well as the amount of work required in the class. She also tries to have the students interact through presentations individually or in groups. She claims that by doing this “their presentations become interactive, in the sense that the rest of the students and the professor engage in dialog about the material covered. I find that the students learn the material better this way and that the material is more enduring.”

As far as papers go she strives to give the students valuable feedback in stages throughout the semester. She tries to break up the assignments in to manageable chunks so that after each section is completed she can comment and help the student recognize both their strengths and weaknesses. This is in hopes that the students will not only have a quality end product, but also so that the students can learn how to not make similar mistakes in the future.

All this effort she puts into her classes is to reach the goal of maximizing student learning. She says that she feels “that if there is student ownership in the course, if they are more actively engaged in it, they are going to learn better and the knowledge will be longer lasting. I always ask myself what do I want them to remember in 5 years. Then I device strategies that will

help me to meet the goals of students.” She claims that tests alone cannot accomplish this goal, and accordingly includes multiple ways to measure student learning such as through group projects and online assignments. Her strategies seem to be working because it “helps them to focus on being more creative and enjoy the course more than to cram for a test.”

Service

Despite all the different activities that Dr. Cordero does as both a researcher and an educator she is still able to find time to serve in the community. Some of the many different ways she serves is within the community, her department, and the university. Currently she is the head of the Spanish section in the department. Part of her duties in this role are to “organize meetings so that the faculty can discuss changes in the curriculum, the possible need for extra lecturers to teach courses, assessment of our program objectives and whatever important issues arise.” In addition to that she helps to evaluate whether or not credits from other universities can transfer into the program. Other positions that she has previously held within the department include the chair of study abroad scholarship committee, a number of award selection committee, the department representative for the faculty senate, and an advisor for the Global Communications practicum.

Her service isn’t limited to the department however, as she has also served on a number of committees for the university as a whole. She has served on the faculty executive committee and a diversity committee that aimed to improve the working environment of the faculty who are composed of a wide variety of backgrounds.

In addition she encourages her students to get out and serve those who may be considered underprivileged. For 8 years Dr. Cordero took students to Mexico in order to build adobe houses

for those who needed them. As part of this she was the instructor for the Spanish outreach program which “involves creating the opportunity for advanced students of Spanish to be able to get out into the community and work on projects to serve the Hispanic community in Cache Valley.” Some of the projects that the students have participated in include serving as interpreters at Logan Regional Hospital and helping ESL classes in after school programs.

Finally she really strives to help her students to understand the experiences of migrant workers through service. When she taught a connections course she “took students to a nearby raspberry patch to weed, so that I could help them to better understand the work that migrant workers often have to do. I have taken students to a refugee facility as well to help translate there. These activities were to help the students to better relate what they were learning academically to the real world scenarios. This is all knowledge that they are gaining through experience that they can apply throughout their lives and I find that so valuable.”

One can easily see why Dr. Cordero is valued within not only the department that she works in but also in the university. Through her work as a researcher, an educator, and through her service she has helped teach and promote the advancements in her field in a way that will prove to have a positive impact within not only the community but all those who associate with her.

By Austin Dopp