

Regional

Teaching Spanish to health professionals at SIUE

Students today need to be globally competent and prepared for the challenges of working in a multicultural society. Three SIUE professors have come together to take a significant step towards improving student readiness for serving multicultural populations in a healthcare context by offering a new interdisciplinary class, Spanish language and culture for health professionals. Heidi Cuervo Carruthers, Amelia Perez and Marcelo Nieto created this class to help future health care providers communicate more effectively with the growing Hispanic population in the area and in the nation.

Perez, originally from the Dominican Republic, has been teaching at SIUE since 2003, and studies acculturation, high blood pressure and health literacy among Hispanics. Carruthers, originally from Venezuela, has been at SIUE since 2007 and teaches all levels of Spanish language and linguistics, trains student teachers in the foreign language teaching certification program and researches foreign language learning theory. Nieto, who is from Argentina, teaches medicinal chemistry and researches natural products-based drug discovery. All three share the view that both language and culture affect the decisions people make about their health care, and that to improve health care for the Hispanic community health care providers need to be knowledgeable about the linguistic and cultural context of their patients.

"If the Hispanic patients cannot communicate with their health care providers, then they will not know how to take care of themselves," said Perez. "It really makes a difference to get the students started early on as opposed to on-the-job-exposure. If the students learn about the language and culture in school, they will be prepared when they graduate." Carruthers added that her students study about different Hispanic cultures.

"In our class the students learn about not making generalizations and creating stereotypes," she said. "We have Spanish speakers from more than 20 countries that have many sub-cultures, and while the link is the Spanish language, each patient from each country and region within different countries may have a lot of differences among them."

Nieto said that for each week of the



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Dr. Marcelo Nieto of the School of Pharmacy, Dr. Amelia Perez of the School of Nursing and Dr. Heidi Cuervo Carruthers of the Foreign Languages and Literature department.

course, in addition to discussing contemporary issues, the students learn about the cultural backgrounds of the Hispanic population. For example, early on in the course students are asked to investigate the common foods, healing beliefs and health care systems of different countries. This exercise allows students to see the larger picture of commonality and disparity among different regions of Latin America. Particularly relevant is the students understanding the

varying traditions of herbal medicines that inform patient approaches to healing and conceptions of health.

"We discuss medicinal plants and herbal remedies because those are the things that patients commonly use and often request," Nieto said. Also important to studying the cultural setting of health care is the idea of the roles people play as health care providers. The role of the nurse or the pharmacist carries with it different expectations in dif-

ferent health care systems. When students can gain perspective in this regard they are able to anticipate possible misunderstandings and educate patients better about how the U.S. health system works.

Nieto added that often it is the details of language and culture that need attention in health care situations. To illustrate how a small detail can have a high stakes impact, Carruthers described a situation of a mistranslation by a patient of the phrase

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"once daily" in a prescription. In Spanish the word "once" means 11. Fortunately, a health care provider with knowledge of Spanish was able to correct the mistranslation from 11 times daily to once daily and avoid an over-dosing. Knowledge of the details of language and culture clearly can influence the effective delivery of health care.

Another aspect to this class that helps the students prepare for work situations is the interdisciplinary nature of its design. "We have the students working in interdisciplinary teams because that is the way health care takes place today," Perez said. "You don't work alone no matter whether you are a doctor, nurse, pharmacist or physical therapist, and you have to work as a team to provide care for patients." In addition, Spanish majors in the class are able to bring their background training as translators and interpreters to contribute to a simulated team dynamic. One of the new developments in the course this coming semester will be the use of a simulation lab for which Perez recently was named as coordinator in the school of nursing. The simulation lab will allow for students to practice their Spanish in interdisciplinary teams with guests from the community.

In addition to language practice for different health contexts, the class also features guest speakers that come in to share their knowledge, expertise and experiences volunteering abroad, such as Ozzie Hunter, a pediatric faculty in the school of nursing, Kelly Gable, who researches psychopharmacology in the school of pharmacy and Mary Grose, a bilingual registered nurse who has volunteered for years in Honduras and Peru. These types of guest speakers from the university and local community enhance the class for students and open up opportunities for their future participation in local and international projects and also expand possibilities for career paths.

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