Innovative Teaching Proposal 2014

**Project title:** Nuestra Casa: A Spanish Living Learning Community  
**Project Co-Directors:** Dr. Isabel Asensio, Dr. Electra Fielding, and Dr. Alicia Giralt

**Challenge:** One of the main obstacles to achieving proficiency in a foreign language is finding a community where to practice foreign language skills. The Department of Foreign Languages at WSU emphasizes communicative skills, but even if classroom time is predominantly used to practicing listening and speaking, students still need to speak in the foreign language outside of class if they are to achieve proficiency. This is the main reason why the Foreign Languages Program encourages its students to participate in study abroad programs, but just a small number of students are able to take advantage of these opportunities. The challenge for faculty is to provide language and culture immersion opportunities for students.

**Rationale: Description of the project**

This project will strive to duplicate some of the benefits of a study abroad experience without leaving campus. It consists of the creation of Nuestra Casa (Our Home), a living-learning community (LLC) on campus with a focus on the Spanish language and Hispanic culture. This will be the first of its kind in Weber State University and in other public institutions of higher education in the State of Utah as far as we know.

*Nuestra Casa* will give students a unique residential learning experience that will connect classroom learning with residence life. WSU students will enjoy all the usual advantages of living on campus in a residence hall, with the added benefit of living among a group that shares academic goals and interests (to become more fluent in the Spanish language and culture). Through student, faculty and staff partnerships, and educational and cultural programs, active involvement in this LLC will allow students to broaden their perspectives and understanding of the world around them. This holistic approach complements classroom experiences and lays the foundation for students to become better prepared to succeed in life beyond college.

*Nuestra Casa* will be a community of students dedicated to improving their Spanish language skills and exploring Hispanic cultures. To that end, students will challenge each other to maintain an environment of immersion and cooperative learning. Through biweekly meetings, educational sessions and conversation hours, as well as attendance to academic, cultural, and social events on and off campus, participants in *Nuestra Casa* will
be able to expand their proficiency in the target language and culture. Because Ogden has an estimated Hispanic community of 30% of the city’s population, there are various opportunities to utilize these skills in the wider Ogden community and Weber County.

**Description of the innovation**

**Learning objectives and expected outcomes:**
1. Language development/fluency
2. Cultural development
3. Academic achievement through social development

The learning objectives and outcomes go hand in hand with the structure of *Nuestra Casa*. Students will participate in different areas of involvement within the *Nuestra Casa* program:

1. **Language development/fluency:** One of the main reasons to join *Nuestra Casa* is the opportunity to be immersed in the Spanish language. Participants are encouraged to speak Spanish at all times in *Nuestra Casa* in order to create a successful immersion experience. Language immersion is also encouraged through our biweekly meetings, social activities and other academic programming. In order to guarantee respect for the rule of “language immersion,” a live-in student mentor will monitor participants and will make sure that Spanish is spoken most of the time.

   By the end of the semester, participants are expected to increase their oral proficiency by one level (following the oral proficiency ratings established by ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages). For example, a student entering into the *Nuestra Casa* program with a level of novice low is expected to achieve novice mid, or even high, by the end of the semester.

2. **Cultural development:** The *Nuestra Casa* experience goes beyond language education. Participants will also learn about Hispanic cultures. Cultural education will be provided through our biweekly meetings and dinners, social events, and participation in other events on campus that focus on celebrating the Hispanic heritage. These events will be organized in conjunction with the Hispanic Area Council, the Spanish Club and the Hispanic Honors Society, Sigma Delta Pi.

   By the end of the semester, participants are expected to have actively participated in one book discussion; have written a number of journal entries in the *Nuestra Casa* Blog; have attended at least 3 lectures by guest speakers and/or faculty members from the WSU
3. Academic achievement through social development: Activities in this category provide opportunities to connect with other students who share the same academic goals and to enjoy the atmosphere of living on campus. Social events help to create bonds between the residents living in Nuestra Casa and other student groups on campus such as the Hispanic Area Council, the Spanish Club and the Hispanic Honors Society, Sigma Delta Pi. The live-in student mentor will act as liaison between the Nuestra Casa residents and the above-mentioned student groups on campus.

By the end of the semester, students are expected to participate/complete a final group project. This group project may vary from service in the local Hispanic community to campus cultural programs, such as holiday gatherings (Day of the Dead), tertulias, etc. The faculty director will supervise and guide participants as they work on their final group projects.

**Note:** depending on the success, and thus continuity of this program, we will seek CEL (Community Engaged Learning) designation through the CCEL (Center for Community Engaged Learning).

**Activities:**

- Guest speakers (2-3 informal guests from the community) (gift card only for guests outside our department)
- Campus activities (4 per semester): convocation events, movie nights, game nights, tertulias (professor-guided informal conversations), etc. in collaboration with WSU’s Spanish Club and Sigma Delta Pi.
- Biweekly dinners: every other week, the students in the LLC and the faculty director (and/or another faculty member from the Spanish section) will have dinner either on campus or in different Hispanic restaurants in the area. These dinners are an opportunity for the faculty director to assess the progress in the students’ communicative skills as well as an opportunity for students to chat with the faculty member in an informal environment.
- Community service.
- Students in the Spanish program will read and respond to the blog Nuestra Casa which will be maintained by students in the LLC, using blog.weber.edu
- Book discussion (2 times per semester). The faculty director and co-directors will choose a book for students to read. Students will meet with the faculty director at least two times per semester to discuss it.
Preliminary Evidence

Proficiency in a language correlates to the amount of time one practices it. The best way to become proficient is being immersed in the culture, thus, students who participate in a study abroad program become fluent faster than those who don’t. This is evidence to suggest that if students spend several hours a day, with peers, immersed in Spanish-speaking situations, their fluency and understanding of the culture will increase.

Implementation

Professors Asensio, Fielding and Giralt have already met with Weber State Housing administrators and they have been most receptive to our ideas.

1. In the Spring 2014, Spanish faculty will conduct a search among upper division students to find the ideal student mentor.
2. This LLC will be advertised on the Student Housing website, among other websites.
3. A new class (with both lower and upper division course numbers) will be added to the Fall Schedule (please see attached syllabus).
4. Signs will be posted around campus advertising the new class and the corresponding LLC program. It will also be advertised on the big screen located on the 2nd floor of Elizabeth Hall.
5. Faculty will also inform their students about the new class and LLC program.

Assessment of student progress

Prior to entering Nuestra Casa, the students will be required to do an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) with a faculty member from the Department of Foreign Languages (Dr. Asensio, Dr. Fielding and Dr. Giralt have been trained on conducting OPIs. Dr. Asensio and Dr. Fielding conduct proficiency interviews for the Utah Foreign Language Association on a regular basis). These interviews will assess the students’ level of Spanish according to the guidelines established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The students will be interviewed again at the end of the term with the assistance of faculty in the Spanish Section of the Department of Foreign Languages. The results will be compared to those of a control group enrolled in regular face-to-face campus classes. In our lower-division classes it is required to administer a final oral interview to all students. This data will provide us with the necessary information to assess Nuestra Casa students’ progress. For instance, students entering Nuestra Casa at a level of novice-mid
will have their final assessment results compared to students enrolled in Spanish 1020 final interview results, whose entering level in Spanish 1020 is also novice-mid. By doing this, we will be able to assess if residing in a LLC does indeed improves oral proficiency. Similar tests will be conducted to assess knowledge of the target culture.

**Sustainability**

We plan to begin with a small group of students (10-15) during the first semester of *Nuestra Casa*, but many more students will benefit, even the first semester when it’s implemented. Spanish Club students will participate in some of the activities, as well as Sigma Delta Pi student members. Students from all levels in Spanish classes will also be invited to join *Nuestra Casa*’s social activities where only Spanish will be spoken. Students in regular classes will read *Nuestra Casa* students’ journal entries as part of their reading assignments. This will create a readers’ community and since writers will be students in similar demographic situations (age, location, school level) we expect the students’ level of interest will be higher than it is currently, when they read materials to which sometimes they cannot relate.

In Spring Semester of 2013, 45 of Weber State University Spanish students from various levels completed a survey about their interest in this LLC. Overall, student feedback was encouraging and positive (see Appendix 1). After the first year of *Nuestra Casa*, we will evaluate the students’ experience through a survey. If the results are positive and student interest continues, *Nuestra Casa* could easily become an innovative regular offering of the Weber State University Campus. As mentioned previously, as far as we know there are no other public institutions of higher education in the state of Utah that offer this opportunity to students. We believe that as Weber State University becomes more diverse, more students reside on campus, more students become aware of *Nuestra Casa*, and as we receive students from K-12 who have attended immersion programs in the community as well as heritage speakers, there is a potential pool of future residents of *Nuestra Casa*.

This project in its current form is contingent on receiving the necessary funding. We had a meeting with the Director of Residence Life and the Assistant Director of Residence Life last October to discuss our options, but we could not come to a final agreement until we discussed it with our language section. We met with the Spanish section last November and the faculty were enthusiastic and supportive of this program but it was made clear that the department doesn’t have the money to finance the pilot program. If we were awarded this Innovative Teaching Grant we would move forward with our plans as explained in this proposal.
It is our intent, once we finish the pilot program and assess the results of the experience, to search for other sources of funding to be utilized in future school years, such as scholarship moneys to pay for the live-in mentor tuition or the possibility of applying for an activity waiver through the College of Arts and Humanities for the live-in mentor.

**Budget Narrative**

1. **Student mentor:** $4,160 (two semester tuition) + $831 (student fees). This will be in the form of an academic grant. Current students will have to apply for it. The grantee will be required to live in *Nuestra Casa* and will be in charge of a number of tasks such as supervising students’ use of Spanish, planning activities, and keeping in contact with the faculty director.

2. **Faculty director:** $2,700 to pay for an adjunct (faculty member’s release time). The faculty director supervises the student application process to live in *Nuestra Casa*, the student mentor (and the grant), and the organization of the activities.

3. **Book discussion groups:** 10 Kindles Paperwhite ($139 each x 10 = $1,390). These Kindles will belong to the living learning community and the FL Department. Students will have to check them out in order to read the assigned book for the book discussion groups every semester. Students must return the Kindles at the end of every semester. The purpose of using Kindles is twofold: to be eco-friendly and to create the first FL Department Kindle library (during semesters that Kindles are not being used by the living learning community students, any FL student would be allowed to check a Kindle out to read a book in any of the foreign languages we teach). If we happen to secure a group larger than 10 students, and more than 10 students need an e-reader, we have 14 iPads Mini available in the Department of Foreign Languages for student use. As when using Kindles, the students will need to check out the iPads in order to read the assigned book.

   **3.1. Book discussion groups:** every semester, the students participating in the living learning community will be assigned a book to read. The book will be a current bestseller in any of the Hispanic countries. These books may be fiction or non-fiction. Students will read the book and meet two times to discuss it throughout the semester. The faculty director will also participate in these book group discussions.

   **3.2. Amazon gift card:** to purchase the first book for each Kindle (ebooks in Amazon.com range from $6.99 to $11.99). (10 Kindles x $11.99 max. = $120)
4. **Gift cards**: as a courtesy we would like to thank guest speakers from the community with a $50 gift card. (2 guests x $50 = $100)

5. **Meals for faculty**: Close contact with faculty is a hallmark of the education students receive at WSU. With this program, we plan to expand the interactions among faculty and students so students can hear Spanish-speakers with perfect fluency. We will schedule several meals so students and faculty (from the Spanish section) can talk during meals. Family meals are also a key component of Spanish culture. We expect to visit several restaurants that offer Hispanic food and talk about cultural issues during these times.

### Budget at a glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student mentor grant</td>
<td>$4,160 + $831 = $4,991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty director release time</td>
<td>$2,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindles Paperwhite ($139 each x 10)</td>
<td>$1,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazon gift card for e-books ($11.99 max. each x 10)</td>
<td>$12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift cards for guest speakers ($50 x 2)</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals for faculty ($15 per meal, 2 faculty, 7 times during the semester)</td>
<td>$210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$9,611</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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APPENDIX I: Results from the survey conducted in various lower-division and upper-division Spanish courses during Spring Semester 2013.

Living Learning Community Survey Results

1. Which of the following best describes you?

![Bar chart showing responses to question 1]

2. Which type of housing do you currently live in?

![Bar chart showing responses to question 2]
3. If we were to establish a Living-Learning Community at University Village, how interested would you be in participating?

4. Participating in a Living-Learning Community requires a level of involvement. How often would you be able to participate in Spanish-related extracurricular activities (i.e. movies, attending shows and/or exhibitions, cooking demonstrations, etc.)
5. Would you be willing to volunteer within the Living-Learning Community (organizing activities, providing student support, reporting to faculty, etc.)

![Bar chart showing the distribution of responses to the question.]

**TOTAL STUDENTS: 45**

**Comments:**
I think that a Living-Learning Community sounds awesome! I am just at a point in my life where living in student dorms is not ideal for me. Although I wouldn't want to live in the dorms, etc., I would still be extremely interested in attending activities and interacting with the students living in the LLC.

4/11/2013 12:21 PM [View respondent’s answers]
It sounds like an interesting idea but I would not be able to participate since I am a single parent.

4/11/2013 12:21 PM [View respondent's answers]
No.

4/11/2013 12:20 PM [View respondent's answers]
one that I can think of at the moment

4/11/2013 12:19 PM [View respondent's answers]
Lived in on-campus housing before and am not doing it again.

4/11/2013 12:18 PM [View respondent's answers]
We should have international spanish day at weber with food and a fiesta.

4/8/2013 12:20 PM [View respondent's answers]
It is a good idea to draw more of the hispanic community and to bring in more diversity in the language program. With immersion the foreign language is learned much quicker.

4/8/2013 12:19 PM View respondent's answers

This is a great idea. It would help those who are trying to learn the language get involved. It would help those who only speak Spanish to meet new people here and make connections with other "learners". I think it would create a greater amistad amongst all students involved with the language. by creating this kind of thing, Weber State would eventually become an icon for the spanish community and renown for a more advanced involved program like this one. This idea may begin slightly slow, but with well programmed advertisement and fun spanish languaged involved activities, it could fly. this is overall 100% a great idea. I see all levels of "learners" and "speakers" being highly benefitted from such a program. DO IT

4/8/2013 12:18 PM View respondent's answers

I love the idea!!!!

4/8/2013 12:15 PM View respondent's answers

Nope

4/8/2013 12:14 PM View respondent's answers

id have to know more of the ideas and such....

4/8/2013 12:12 PM View respondent's answers

I think it would be good but I am married and live in my own house and work full time.

4/8/2013 12:12 PM View respondent's answers

ME PARECE UNA IDEA MUY DIVERTIDA QUE AYUDARA INVOLUCRAR A MUCHOS ESTUDIANTES QUE SON DE MUCHAS LUGARES.

4/8/2013 12:12 PM View respondent's answers

I really like this idea, my current circumstances make it so that it would be near impossible for me to move into the dorms but it would most definitely be a great opportunity.

4/8/2013 11:21 AM View respondent's answers

I think this would be a great way to learn spanish. I have learned a different language and what helped me the most was speaking as much as I could in the language.

4/8/2013 11:20 AM View respondent's answers

Sounds interesting.

4/8/2013 11:15 AM View respondent's answers

This sounds like a great idea! I think there is a great resource of mature return missionaries and native speakers alike in our area that could really do some good in this respect.

3/17/2013 9:49 PM View respondent's answers

I would rather serve/volunteer than feel like an awkward observer who doesn't even know the language! But I love serving!

3/15/2013 7:36 PM View respondent's answers

I wouldn't be able to participate in this unless there were some sort of arrangement for
married students, but I would still be interested in helping with the program if I could.
SAMPLE SYLLABUS

SPAN 2920 Nuestra Casa: Spanish Living Learning Community
Fall 2014

Instructor/Director: Dr. Isabel Asensio
Other faculty members involved: Dr. Electra Fielding and Dr. Alicia Giralt
Office: Elizabeth Hall 230; office phone: 626-6777
Office hours: TBA
isabelasensio@weber.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed to give students a unique residential learning experience that will connect classroom learning with residence life. Students will be expected to live on campus in a residence hall, but will enjoy the benefit of living among a group that shares the same academic goal: to become more fluent in the Spanish language and culture. Through student, faculty and staff partnerships, together with a diverse educational and cultural program, students will broaden their perspectives and understanding of the Hispanic world.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

1. Language development/fluency: Participants are encouraged to speak Spanish at all times in Nuestra Casa in order to create a successful immersion experience. Language immersion is also encouraged through our biweekly meetings, social activities and other academic programming. By the end of the semester, participants are expected to increase their oral proficiency by one level (following the oral proficiency ratings established by ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages). For example, a student entering into the Nuestra Casa program with a level of novice low is expected to achieve novice mid, or even high, by the end of the semester.

2. Cultural development: Participants will also learn about Hispanic cultures. Cultural education will be provided through our biweekly meetings and dinners, social events, and participation in other events on campus that focus on celebrating the Hispanic heritage. By the end of the semester, participants are expected to have actively participated in book discussions; have written a number of journal entries in the Nuestra Casa Blog; have attended at least 3 lectures by guest speakers and/or faculty members from the WSU Department of Foreign Languages.
3. **Academic achievement through social development:** Activities in this category provide opportunities to connect with other students who share the same academic goals and to enjoy the atmosphere of living on campus. By the end of the semester, students are expected to participate/complete a final group project. This group project may vary from service in the local Hispanic community, to campus cultural programs such as holiday gatherings (Day of the Dead), tertulias, etc.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

A. **General attendance and participation:** The program plans for this course include campus activities and lectures among other activities. Attendance to these scheduled events is essential and you are expected to attend to all of them. It is your responsibility to notify me of ANY absence that may be absolutely necessary.

B. **Book discussion:** The faculty director and the other faculty members involved will agree on a book for students to read during the semester. Students will meet with the faculty director at least two times per semester to discuss it.

C. **Weekly journal entries:** Together with the campus activities and the final group project, this is one of the most important course requirements. Each student is responsible for keeping a weekly journal of their reflections on the campus activities, lectures, experiences, and concerns that are encountered during their time living on this community. Weekly journal entries (15 in total) must be reflective and introspective, not merely descriptive comments about what you did or saw. As you write these entries, try and frame your comments in such a manner that they explain how this course helps you understand the Hispanic world and how this experience impacts your development as a global citizen who cares about global issues.

D. **Guest speakers:** Students are to attend 2 to 3 lectures given by guests from the community or by faculty from the Department of Foreign Languages. A summary report should be submitted to the faculty director afterwards.

E. **Campus activities:** Students will organize several activities (4 per semester) in collaboration with WSU’s Spanish Club and Sigma Delta Pi. Some possible activities include but are not limited to movie nights, game nights, tertulias (professor guided informal conversations), etc.

F. **Biweekly dinners:** every other week, the students in the LLC and the faculty director (and/or another faculty member from the Spanish section) will have dinner either on
campus or in different Hispanic restaurants in the area. These dinners are an opportunity for the faculty director to assess the progress in the students’ communicative skills as well as an opportunity for students to chat with the faculty member in an informal environment.

G. Final group project: Ideally, this would be a community-service group project in the local Hispanic community but it is not limited to that. The faculty director will supervise and guide students as they work on their final group projects.

GRADE BREAKDOWN

Book discussion: 10%
Weekly journal entries: 30%
Guest speakers: 10%
Campus activities: 10%
Biweekly dinners with faculty: 10%
Final group project: 30%

TENTATIVE WEEKLY SYLLABUS

Week 1
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry
Preliminary interviews to test oral proficiency

Week 2
Journal entry
Campus activity

Week 3
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry

Week 4
Journal entry
Guest speaker (TBA)
Week 5
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry

Week 6
Book discussion
Campus activity

Week 7
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry

Week 8
Guest speaker (TBA)

Week 9
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry

Week 10
Journal entry
Campus activity

Week 11
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry

Week 12
Book discussion
Guest speaker (TBA)

Week 13
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry

Week 14 (Thanksgiving week)
Journal entry
Campus activity
Week 15
Dinner with faculty
Journal entry
Final group project portfolio due
Final assessment individual interview