



## Crossing Borders and Pushing the Limits of the Possible: The COA Language and Cultural Immersion Program

*"No funciona. Es imposible." "It can't work. It's impossible."*

When COA's Spanish professor, Karla Peña described her human ecological approach to total immersion in teaching language and culture, that was the response. It was from no less an authority than the director of the world renowned University of Nebrija Graduate Program in Teaching Spanish as a Second Language. But Karla had already proven to her students and colleagues at College of the Atlantic (COA) that her approach worked – and she went on to demonstrate its success to her professor at Nebrija through her graduate program and to the readers of *RedELE*, one of the premier journals in the field, in which she published her work.

### PROGRAM HISTORY

From its start in 1995 with a Title VI grant, COA put the interdisciplinary integration of theory and practice in cross-cultural learning at the center of its human ecology program in Yucatan. In the first years, teams of three faculty went to Mexico to offer 10 week "monster courses" integrating Spanish studies, homestays, and field projects. The experiment proved that the already successful model could be dramatically enhanced by switching to complete immersion in Spanish, extending the term to 14 weeks, and preparing students with a fall course taught immersively by a Yucatecan professor.

That professor, Karla Peña, continued to innovate strategies for: 1) pushing students into total immersion from the first day of class on campus; 2) using culture shocks of different kinds to accelerate





**One of the most challenging experiences of my life and I wouldn't change a thing. I will continue to grow from this program long after I leave.**

—IAIN COOLEY '21

**...teaches language in relation to cultural context and teaches its participants how to avoid being tourists and instead deeply engage with the people and place in which they are in. This program will not only change the way you travel but also the way in which you view the world.**

—VERA FISHMAN-RESHEFF '22

**Karla is one of the best teachers I have ever had. She somehow got a group of American college students to communicate and thrive in the Spanish language in a span of no more than three months. Truly an immersive cultural learning experience!**

—ADITYA KRISHNA SATHISH '19

the acquisition of Spanish, cross-cultural competencies, and personal transformation; 3) providing problem centered learning opportunities for students from all resource areas; and 4) enabling even those students who found languages difficult to successfully design and implement their individual three week independent immersion projects at the end of their second trimester of Spanish study. For more gifted students, the pedagogical model proved to not only be effective in accelerating their learning of Spanish but enabled them to subsequently design and develop independent learning programs in other languages like German, Mandarin, and Czech. She dramatically extended the partnerships with Yucatecan institutions and communities and by 2010 the program was relying on them for all of the teaching in Yucatan.

Innovation in the program has been steady and included, more recently, the development of advanced college-level language programs for native Spanish speakers, programs in Maya, and multiple Projects for Peace programs. While the program has been incredibly successful, it has been run on an unsustainable shoestring budget for over two decades that has undercompensated staff and faculty. We have the opportunity now to move beyond the tenuous existence of pilot program funding models by taking a first rate flagship program that is central to COA's curriculum in international human ecology and presenting it to the world as a securely endowed, showcase program.

### **A DISTINCTIVE APPROACH**

The distinctive power of the program comes in part from its innovative use of total immersion in the language and the culture that gives it context and meaning -- and the culture shock this creates which precipitates fundamental changes in student assumptions about the world as well as their self-concepts as learners and cultural agents. It comes further from the full implementation of a human ecological pedagogy in which





**...a life changing experience because at the end of the day we have learned to see things the way the people here see them. We become a new person with new minds and new eyes able to see the things that are the most important in life.**

—TAIBATOU BINTOU ADAMOU GARBA '22

**...incredibly effective, fully immersive programs of inter-cultural exchange that challenge each individual student to develop unique strategies for entering into an unfamiliar context and establishing connections that go far beyond those of the tourist and the tour guide. The programs are run by highly trained and unbelievably dedicated faculty and staff, who tirelessly work to adapt the program to fit student's needs. Students, like myself, leave... with impressive language skills, intercultural awareness, lasting connections with the people of Yucatan, and an overall experience that is unforgettable.**

—GAELN HALL '21

students are immersed in – and forced to integrate learning from – multiple disciplines, ways of knowing, and modes of being in the world. It also comes from the long term relationships that are cultivated in subsequent internships, residencies, senior projects and other collaborations with students' Yucatecan colleagues, friends and family.


In September, students begin with zero Spanish language proficiency. By the end of February, they are able to negotiate their own way into a rural community in Yucatan and successfully pull off a three week collaborative project. The projects serve the community while students pursue a virtually unlimited range of interests: farming, midwifery, marine science, music, economic development, etc. In the process they learn to practice the integrative, holistic methods of human ecology in equitable, just ways that combine learning with action. And all this is done entirely in Spanish from the very start – from the moment they first enter the fall course on campus as preparation for the 14 week winter program in Mexico. The program in Mexico includes homestays with families, extensive field experiences and three courses: one in Spanish language and Hispanic culture in the Yucatan, one in indigenous Maya culture and history, and one as a practicum which culminates in the three week solo work in a community.

To make all of this work – to push the limits of the “impossible” – it is necessary for students to learn and work outside of their comfort zones. The materials and methods in class are very dynamic, immersive, and exciting. They are also very challenging and students go through a series of culture shocks – shocks that are purposefully used to empower them to dramatically broaden and enrich their concepts of themselves and Others. For many students who come from a mainstream white community in the US, immersion in a Mayan pueblo may be their first experience of being in a minority position. They commonly describe it as one of the most life transforming experiences of their entire education. They learn to practice respectful, justice-centered human ecology as autonomous,

**COA's commitment to its special project of international education has produced some very rewarding and transformative results... We think that COA is ready to jump to the next level and to serve as a model for liberal arts education."**

—HOWARD LAMSON, TITLE VI EXTERNAL EVALUATOR, PROFESSOR IN SPANISH AT EARLHAM COLLEGE

social, inter-cultural agents.

This kind of program is transformative not just for individuals taking it, but for the larger undergraduate community of which they are a part. It has created a wide range of spaces on campus in which Spanish is used and spoken by groups of students eating, playing, working and collaborating on a wide range of activist projects and academic research. It has played a key role in supporting and affirming students from Hispanic backgrounds as well as modeling a campus culture of diversity, equity and inclusion for students from all backgrounds. 

## FUNDING OPPORTUNITY

While the program has been incredibly successful, it has been run on an unsustainable shoestring budget for over two decades that has undercompensated staff and faculty. The COA Language and Cultural Immersion Program will take a first rate flagship that is central to COA's curriculum in international human ecology and present it to the world as a securely endowed, showcase program for learning Spanish language, Hispanic culture, and methods of cross-cultural collaboration in human ecology projects. It will continue to build on, sustain, and share with the larger world the model which Karla and her colleagues at COA and in Merida, Yucatan, have been developing for two decades.

The \$2 million endowed program will support two primary program components: the position of program director and program enhancement funds.



**The program director** is an especially innovative hybrid position that is the heart of the program. It involves a heavy load of teaching in the fall and winter trimesters as well as a heavy and complex load of administrative work. To make the program as uniformly successful for students as it is, this position develops a rich diversity of resources that meets their individual needs. To push the limits of the possible, "it takes a village". The director must recruit, train and oversee a network of support staff, host families, and community allies and collaborators in the city of Merida and the pueblos in which students work.



**Program enhancement funds** will be used to continue developing an extended team and community network that can sustain and enhance the program, resources for maintenance of facilities in Merida, intervisitation opportunities between Mexico and the US, and model outreach. Enhancement funds will also help the director identify and mentor the next generation of leaders who will carry the program forward.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Through two decades of success, the impact of this program has been well-documented. To learn more, visit [coa.edu/academics/off-campus-study/yucatan](http://coa.edu/academics/off-campus-study/yucatan)