

SIUE undergrad earns regional honors for research on representations of Latina and Hispanic women in films

by Megan Wieser
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EDWARDSVILLE - The research of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville junior Ellie Vondohlen is receiving regional attention, as she presented at the Foreign Language and Culture Symposium on Saturday, April 1 at Saint Louis University.

Vondohlen has been invited to present at the 22nd Annual Women's and Gender Studies Symposium at Illinois State University on Friday, April 14. Her work has been selected as the outstanding undergraduate paper for Symposium, earning her the Rhonda Nicol Memorial Book Award.

Vondohlen, of Marshall, is pursuing a bachelor's in Spanish and secondary education, with an endorsement in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Through the University's Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program, Vondohlen has had the opportunity to conduct her research with mentorship from Carolina Rocha, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Foreign Language and Literature.

Her research focuses on the representations of Latina and Hispanic women in recent films, particularly how they are able to transform their role in society through immigration.

“My paper seeks to understand the history, representations and multi-dimensionality of Latina women, specifically today in the United States,” Vondohlen said. “My findings indicate that Latina women face tremendous pressure to carry on their heritage culture by transmitting those values through marriage and instilling them in their children. Through immigration, however, Latinas are in a new society that forces them and give them the opportunity to redefine who they are, whether that be traditional, less traditional or independent.”

“Immigration is a topic that has always been close to my heart, especially with the possibility of teaching ESL to people of other cultures,” she added. “Because I am not a native or heritage speaker of Spanish, I think it's important that I learn all I can about the Hispanic culture, so I can confront stereotypes and give the most authentic language and culture learning experience possible to my future students.”

“I was thrilled to learn that Ellie's presentation has been accepted in two different conferences, because it shows that our weekly meetings and her hard work, both writing and revising, translate into an outcome of quality recognized by two different institutions,” Rocha said. “URCA provides one-on-one opportunities to conduct research tailored to a student's interests. In many cases, my URCA students have explored topics that are not available in traditional classes, and they have been introduced to the work of scholars from around the world.”

The URCA program exemplifies the University's teacher-scholar philosophy. It focuses on providing students priceless experiences in the lab, field or studio and expanding their curriculum by applying what they've learned in the classroom to real world settings.

“Mentors like Dr. Rocha are the best part of the educational experience,” Vondohlen explained. “She has set aside time to provide me with meaningful materials, hear my perspective and challenge me to dig deeper. My hope is that work like this sparks interest in other students to study and appreciate other languages and cultures.

“My experience at SIUE and in the URCA program have shown me that other languages and cultures are not something to be feared, but a wonderful gift that has expanded my world greatly.”

For more information on SIUE’s unique and innovative URCA program, visit siue.edu/urca.

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