

Strong Foundations: 100 Years of Hispanism at the University of Kansas

“Strong Foundations: 100 Years of Hispanism at the University of Kansas” celebrates the history of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at KU, particularly its pioneering leadership in the wider discipline, the significance of faculty scholarship on Spain and Latin America, their dedication to excellence and innovation in teaching, interdisciplinary collaborations, and long support for internationalizing the education of our students.

This exhibit seeks to capture its impact in many dimensions. In the 1888 Biennial Report to the Board of Regents, the Chair of the Department of English Arthur Richmond Marsh asserted that no meaningful scholarship could be done without the knowledge of French, German, or Spanish literatures. Yet the library had no books in Spanish and just a few in the other languages. Digging into the University Archives, one can find that Hispanic studies at KU grew out of the domain of Romance languages and literatures, with a curriculum dominated by peninsular authors, and that the introduction of Latin American authors was met by resistance. Another surprise was to learn that the renowned scholar and leader of French Studies, Eugénie H. Galloo, was recruited as KU’s first Assistant Professor of French and Spanish. Under her leadership, graduate instruction and research gained prominence among faculty in Romance Languages. She taught the first year of Spanish during the 1890’s. While Galloo’s first term of Spanish was devoted to grammar, reading, and composition; the second term focused on rapid reading of Galdós, Valera, and Moratín. In other words, her teaching of Spanish intended to create readers of the great literary modern authors of the era.

KU’s rise to national prominence in Hispanic Studies began with Arthur Leslie Owen’s publications and advocacy during the 1910s for the teaching of Spanish in high schools. He played a leading role during the first years of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish (established in 1917.) Owen also created the first Spanish course taught at a distance—by radio—and he debated in the pages of the *Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association* on the value of Latin American Literature in the academic curriculum. This is the immediate context in which the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures was established at KU in 1919.

In 1936, while the U.S. was suffering from the Great Depression and in the worst year of the Dust Bowl, KU faculty sought to raise consciousness about the Spanish Civil War across the Atlantic. Their commitment to peace and justice led the faculty to a collective symbolic gesture of adopting a nine-year old boy, Alberto Mata, thru the Foster Parents’ Plan for war children.

Decades later, with the intensification of the Cold War and burgeoning demand for Spanish-language skills and expertise on Latin America, Dean George Waggoner (1954-75), decided to develop Spanish instruction and scholarship at KU as part of a broad strategy to bolster KU’s connections with Latin America. Key faculty members were hired, which had a transformative impact on the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, turning it into one of the world’s leading graduate programs. The 1993 NRC ranking for doctoral programs in Spanish placed KU as the leading program for graduate student training.

KU’s library collections are at the center of this exhibit. How things have changed!

Today, KU Libraries possesses one of the world’s most significant collections for the study of Central America. In the United States, KU Libraries are recognized for holdings on Latin America and the Spanish and Portuguese speaking world, thanks in part to the support provided by KU faculty and Friends of the Library, such as Spanish and Portuguese Professor and distinguished KU administrator, George W. Woodyard.

Over the past century, Spanish and Portuguese have come to occupy a unique intellectual and political space in academia and beyond. One of our department’s most distinguished alumni, Raymond L. Williams, argues that Spanish is “not a foreign language in U.S. universities.” Indeed, it is the first language of many of our faculty and students. More than teaching language and literature, scholarship by KU faculty in Spanish and Portuguese and Latin Americanists in other departments have embraced new themes and enduring questions to engage students and support KU’s mission and vision for the 21st century.

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