

ASU faculty provide a support system of Hispanic history, culture and language

A look at some of the work being done in the field in honor of Hispanic Heritage Month

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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From poetry to childhood development, faculty from all areas in [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#) at Arizona State University are committed to improving educational opportunities for all students and advancing research on Hispanic communities.

As noted by [Lisa Magaña](#), the associate dean of charter initiatives for The College, their work carries on the mission of an inclusive education embodied in the university's [charter](#), measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed.

"These faculty throughout The College personify the best of our charter. Their research is innovative and imperative given the evolving demographics of Latinos and Latinas in the United States," Magaña said.

In honor of Hispanic Heritage Month, we're shining a spotlight on some of these faculty and their work.

Expressing culture through poetry

In 2023, [CantoMundo](#), a [national organization](#) established in 2009 to support Latino poetry, began a partnership with ASU's [Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing](#).

CantoMundo provides a space that fosters community development and critical analysis of Latino literature while bringing awareness to the underrepresentation these poets experience in the industry.

“What is difficult for many students is that they're having to learn essentially three languages: whatever they were first born speaking, whatever they're learning, such as English, and a middle language that you use to fit in,” said [Alberto Ríos](#), the Piper Center’s director.

Ríos says the program gives any student at the university a place to connect and discuss their culture, language and upbringing. The collaboration hosts workshops and public readings to promote supportive communities and professional networks among Latino-identifying poets.

“What we do in CantoMundo is talk about those things. It helps to understand where you're coming from, why it matters or what your nana said to you when you were young. That's all included rather than excluded,” Ríos said. “We are finding ways to bring the CantoMundo experience and spirit into what we do every day, from poetry classes to who we bring in to mentor so that there's a more level playing field for everybody.”

Ríos, who was named director of the Piper Center in 2017, became [Arizona’s inaugural poet laureate](#) in 2013 and is the author of 12 collections of poetry, including “A Small Story about the Sky,” winner of the Southwest Book Award, and “The Theater of Night,” which received the [PEN/Beyond Margins Award](#) in 2007. Since coming to ASU in 1982, he has been named a University Professor of Letters, Regents Professor, Virginia G. Piper Chair in Creative Writing and the current Katharine C. Turner Endowed Chair in English.

In the CantoMundo program, Ríos notes that students don't have to write about just one culture or language — they can explore broader ideas to enrich existing knowledge on any topic.

“It's not an either/or solution. We have to find a way to make things work together. We're the jigsaw puzzle pieces; we've got to figure out where we fit, but know that we do fit,” Ríos said.

Understanding multilingual learning environments

[Viridiana Benitez](#) directs the [Learning and Development Lab](#) and co-founded the [Early Childhood Cognition Research Group](#) in the [Department of Psychology](#). The lab is home to studies that include work with infants, children and adults who have monolingual or multilingual learning experiences.

“My lab particularly focuses on language and cognitive development, especially on how cognition, experience and the environment shape our ability to learn language across development,” said Benitez, an assistant professor of psychology. “We focus on different environments, particularly on monolingual environments where children are learning one language, and compare that to bilingual environments where children are learning two languages.”

Benitez’s lab includes all levels of student researchers, from undergraduates to PhD candidates, and involves them in numerous ways, from recruiting participants to coding and analyzing videos. Students provide crucial support in terms of comparing language-learning environments.

Benitez grew up in a Spanish-speaking household and learned English in school. Now her son is enrolled in dual-language programs to learn both languages simultaneously.

“Hanging on to that heritage language can be so important for connecting to our family and our cultural heritage, so a lot of what we do is focused on just understanding how young children who

are listening to two languages experience them and what are the things that parents want in terms of their bilingual development as well," Benitez said. "That way, we can inform efforts to really promote the development of both languages.

"I have a lot of Latino and Latina students interested in my work, and I think it's because it's about their community and they take a special interest in it. For some of our studies where we're working with bilingual families, they use their Spanish-language skills. We need that to be able to best represent our families in research, and sometimes when students feel that close to the work, it becomes really important for them."

Benitez was recognized this year for her mentorship of graduate students with the Outstanding Faculty Mentor Early Career Award from the Faculty Women's Association at ASU. She mentored students on how to put together research presentations, how to apply for scholarships such as the [Jenessa Shapiro Undergraduate Research Scholarship](#), and how to analyze data to write it up for publication.

"Some of the students who are coming out of the lab are doing amazing things in the early childhood space, locally," Benitez said. "I've seen a few of my students go out and work with their communities to enhance the quality of early childhood education and services."

Networking beyond the classroom

In her classes, [Eileen Díaz McConnell](#) focuses on Mexican and Central American migration. A President's Professor from the [School of Transborder Studies](#), she studies United States population dynamics and the demography of the Latino population.

"I find that students are really hungry to learn more about their own history, and that's also true about Latino and Latina students. Many students recognize the barriers that their communities experience, and they want to try to help overcome those barriers, given the experiences that they have and the education that they have," McConnell said.

Through the classes she teaches, McConnell frequently mentors graduate students on their research papers and presentations. She has noticed common goals in the desire to finish degrees and start their career, and the best way she's found to do this is through introducing her students to her network. She focuses on connecting students to people who have done the kind of work that they're interested in. Students meet with McConnell's suggested alumni and colleagues and gain information on internships or scholarships, letters of recommendation and career advice.

"It's important to understand where a lot of students are," McConnell said. "I need to be respectful of the goals that the students themselves have and alumni have, and try to help them in terms of using my cultural and social capital to try to advance whatever their interests are."

She sees value in connecting students to others who share similar passions to lessen the intimidation that post-grad life can present and hopefully make students' transitions from college to careers smoother and more successful.

"I love that they're the next generation, that there's so much hope, interest and energy. (The students are) really hungry for any opportunity," McConnell said. "I really enjoy when students connect with material I've used in my classes, when they say, 'That's exactly what happened to my

aunt or my uncle,' or whoever. It's incredibly meaningful in terms of teaching."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



From left: School of Transborder Studies President's Professor Eileen Díaz McConnell; Regents Professor and Director of the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing Alberto Ríos; and Assistant Professor and Director of the Learning & Development Lab Viridiana Benitez. Courtesy photos