Greetings from San Luis Obispo!

The 2015-16 academic year was one of opportunities for our department and students. In November, I accompanied our dean and a political science colleague to Beijing, China, where we explored possible partnerships and exchanges with Chinese universities. While these partnerships are still in the embryonic stages, we hope that they will produce opportunities for Cal Poly English majors and faculty to study and teach in China.

Our students, too, traveled extensively this year. In this newsletter, you’ll read about one major who spent his winter break volunteering in a refugee shelter in Cyprus and another who participated in a national conference promoting Hispanic American legislation issues. Additionally, you’ll read about the creation of a new scholarship helping English majors and minors to study abroad — the Dorothy Cooper Memorial Scholarship — and will meet the three inaugural recipients of this award. All of these student opportunities were created by the generous support of alumni like you, and on behalf of the English Department, I thank you.

I hope you enjoy our annual newsletter, filling you in on other happenings in the department. Let us know what you think by posting to our Alumni Facebook page. And please keep in touch — nothing pleases us more than to hear from former students!

Kathryn Rummell
Department Chair
The American Scholar Prize
This award, created by former English Department Chair and College of Liberal Arts Dean Linda Halisky, recognizes an English major whose passion for literature is palpable. The $500 prize is awarded to an English major who exhibits an interest in literature and language — someone who is “lit up” by literature. This year’s recipient is Jacquelyn Morris, a third-year student from Northridge, Calif.

In Morris’ winning essay she writes that “the voices of authors and characters whisper further than the page. The empathy that literature teaches me guides me in my real life by enhancing my ability to understand perspectives that differ from my own.” Her essay demonstrates that she understands the timelessness of literature and its ability to help us understand the human condition.

Dorothy Cooper Memorial Scholarship
The English Department is pleased to announce the first three recipients of the Dorothy Cooper Memorial Scholarship for study abroad. English majors Molly Canfield and Madison Utley join animal science major/English minor Katherine Miller in winning $1,000 scholarships to help support their study abroad experiences. Canfield and Utley traveled to London this summer through Cal Poly’s London Study program, and Miller will study at Massey University in New Zealand this fall.

The Dorothy Cooper Memorial Scholarship is named for the grandmother of a Cal Poly English alumna. Cooper longed to travel — to learn about new people and cultures — but was never able to afford it. The donors, Susan M. Birkenseer (English, ’81) and James J. Birkenseer (Graphic Communication, ’81), hope this scholarship helps students with financial need achieve their dreams of studying abroad. In this way, they hope to honor Dorothy Cooper by enriching students’ lives through travel.

English Department Outstanding Senior — Abigail Johnson
A double major in English and music, Johnson recognized Debora Schwartz as her faculty mentor. This fall she will attend Oxford University to pursue graduate work in medieval studies.

English Department Outstanding Graduate Student — Savannah Pignatelli
Pignatelli recognized Debora Schwartz as her faculty mentor. This fall she begins teaching in the English Department.

Graduate Program Awards
Our graduate program continued its tradition of bestowing its own awards for excellence in the graduate program. This year’s Outstanding Achievement Award was given to two students,
This year saw two of our majors embark on life-changing journeys that illustrate the value and power of a liberal arts education. Mehra Gharibian traveled to Nicosia, Cyprus, to help young refugees; Miguel Contreras attended the League of United Latin American Citizens conference in Washington, D.C. They tell their stories below.

**BY MEHRA GHARIBIAN**

Last December, I was in the airport preparing to spend my winter break in Nicosia, Cyprus, at the Hope for Children refugee shelter. I was excited, I was nervous, but mostly I was relieved. The fall quarter I had just finished had certainly been the hardest quarter of my college career for a variety of reasons, but among all of the usual stresses, I felt a burning responsibility toward this work. The refugees that I saw on my screen every day leaving Iraq and Syria reminded me of my own family history. The families leaving Iraq seemed no different in circumstance or need than my own family, which left Iraq under similar conditions decades ago.

I traveled to Nicosia with a program called Generation Human Rights, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing individualized help and attention to refugee youth around the world and then collecting the results of this work to implement new curricula within American youth education. Specifically, I was tasked to host workshops in narrative expression and storytelling. These types of workshops happened throughout my two weeks, and along the way, I was able to help in even more ways.

I spent my whole day at the shelter every day, arriving after breakfast and leaving after dinner. I quickly got to know many of the boys, most nearing 18 years of age. As we became close, I began to understand specific ways I could help my individual friends. One of my friends needed help with his daily English homework, and some others wanted help learning English at a more rapid level. One very dear friend that I made at the shelter aspired to attend a university in the United States after he finished high school, so I worked with him to research universities and their scholarship opportunities.

This work, along with my assistance or facilitation of different activities and discussions, made the two weeks I was in Nicosia pass far too quickly. I ended my time at the shelter spending Christmas with the boys, many of whom had never celebrated the holiday before.
Gharibian with two friends from the shelter.

We built a Christmas tree and decorated it with lights and ornaments, and over lunch, we discussed the cultural implication of Christmas for countries in the West. Christmas wasn’t simply for Christians, as many of them had previously believed, it was a cultural tradition that included everyone in Western countries. This tradition now included them as well.

For me, my service in Cyprus was a responsibility within the context of my privilege. I am a Middle Eastern American attending a university in California, with my family happy and physically together. Considering the context of my family’s journey to the United States, I am the exception. Through my time at Home for Hope I gained an opportunity to realize this responsibility, as well as the opportunity to befriend some of the most intelligent, motivated, and resilient individuals I’ve ever met. I hope that in addition to the workshops, tutoring and advising, I in turn gave the boys hope for a future in which they settle in the West and have children that may one day attend their own universities and return to fulfill their own responsibilities.

Throughout my trip, and now even more in retrospect, I recognize and appreciate the individuals at Cal Poly who made this experience possible for me. I originally brought the idea to my department chair, Kathryn Rummell, and to the Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Debra Valencia-Laver. They immediately supported me and within a matter of a few days, they were able to find me full funding. For this, I am forever grateful. I am also grateful to the College of Liberal Arts, the English and Ethnic Studies departments, and, most importantly, individual alumni donors. All of these parties made possible an impossibly important experience for me, and I hope, for the friends I met abroad. I plan to pursue a career in academia, and applied.

Before the League of United Latin American Citizens conference in Washington, D.C., began, I visited the Lincoln Memorial. I thought about how far we have come as a nation and how much further we still need to go.

On that day, I realized that I had to take it upon myself to make a change, to set an example to upcoming generations. It was then I decided that I wanted to represent all the people in this country who, like my mother, do not have a voice but who are vital to the success of this nation. I decided on that day, as I looked out at Capitol Hill, that I wanted to make a difference. I want to let others know about my ideas and plans for the future. I hope that one day those ideas may be heard and applied.

As a kid who came from an abusive household and from the ghettos of Anaheim, a person whose parents had a second grade education, I realized that I had accomplished more than was ever expected of me and more than I ever thought possible. And it was then that I realized that I could do anything I set my mind to. I had achieved being part of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

I was about to embark on a conference of a lifetime where I would meet important politicians, go to briefings about public policy issues, and go to awards galas. On the last day of the conference, our briefings and trainings on public policy issues that affect the Latino community and other underrepresented groups would be put to the test. We had advocacy meetings with our congressional representatives, which put me in a nervous yet excited mood. I then met Lois Capps, the representative for the San Luis Obispo region, and I led my cohort in a discussion on recent issues that have been manifesting at Cal Poly and in San Luis Obispo in general. I talked about the racial issues that have come to the surface this year, the death threats to inclusivity organizations on campus, and the lack of diversity at Cal Poly. I also asked Capps about the well-being of the farmworkers that surround our area and the conditions they are forced to work in out in the fields. I hope that my advocacy work made a difference that day. I know that my voice alone will not change things overnight, but at the very least, I made my presence known, and I gave a voice to those who could not be there that day.

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This year was not only about the future, though. Four students received Graduate Presentation Awards to present at the 2016 Humanities Education and Research Association (HERA) Conference: The Nature of Humanity. The program’s faculty are very proud to have these students representing Cal Poly at such well-respected academic conferences. In the spring, eight students passed the M.A. examination: Crystal Herrera, Eric Liewald, David Llamas, Natalia (Nikki) Narvaez, Savannah Pignatelli, Phillip Schierer, Tang-Quan and Wishnewsky. Pignatelli also received the College of Liberal Arts Outstanding English Graduate Student Award, which was based on her excellent graduate academic performance. On the department level, Liewald and Pignatelli were awarded the Graduate Excellence Award based on their cumulative graduate academic coursework as well as their performance on the M.A. examination. The department wishes our graduate students all the best in their future academic and professional endeavors.

For the M.A. PROGRAM
This year the graduate program focused on planning for the future. The faculty voted to make several curricular and programmatic changes to improve the program, including the introduction of a new graduate project, which will take the place of the M.A. examination as the culminating experience for graduate students; the elimination of the foreign language requirement; and the elimination of mandatory conditional coursework for applicants who do not hold a bachelor's degree in English. At the same time, the faculty proposed several exciting new courses. Professor Chelsea Milbourne, director of the Technical Communication program, proposed a graduate seminar on special topics in rhetoric and composition. These courses are meant to provide a greater range of graduate-level rhetoric and composition courses for students interested in pursuing careers related to these fields. Finally, the Introductory Research Methods course (English 501) has been retitled Introduction to English Studies in order to reflect the scope of the discipline. The graduate program is excited about these upcoming changes, which, pending curricular approval, will begin in fall 2017.

This year was not only about the future, though. Four students received Graduate Presentation Awards to present at the National Conference of Peer Tutoring in Writing. Holly Tang-Quan, Natalia Rosli, Hajera Ghori and Sarah Wishnewsky.

Graduate students at John Hampsay’s house.

Students and faculty working in the Technical and Professional Communication Program are excited about new projects and initiatives started in 2015-16. Technical communication students Amanda Jenkins and Malama Wilson joined Cal Poly’s newly created Cybersecurity Case Library, an undergraduate research journal started by Chief Information Officer William Britton that explores how cybersecurity issues impact students across Cal Poly’s campus. Jenkins and Wilson worked as copy editors for the pilot issue and created a style guide for future contributors. Based on their positive experiences working for the Case Library, three new technical communication students will join the project next year.

In addition, faculty in the Technical and Professional Communication Program piloted the 2014-15 curriculum redesign for English 149 – Technical Writing for Engineers. This new curriculum asks students to explore composing technical communication documents in multiple genres for diverse audiences. Sample projects include interviewing engineering professionals and sharing insights with peers, creating how-to instructional videos and translating research innovations for public audiences through podcasts and websites.

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This year the creative writing program invited a number of novelists, writers and poets to visit classes and speak on campus. Among our guests was Nathan Doxel, a journalist previously stationed in the Middle East. Doxel was a former editor at Rolling Stone and The Village Voice and has written essays, reviews and criticism for The New York Times Magazine and GQ, among others. With students, he discussed paths to editorial internships and the process of assembling feature articles for magazines. Another of our standout visitors was poet Wendy Barker, author of nearly a dozen books and recipient of the Mary Elinore Smith Poetry Prize from The American Scholar.

Along with traditional visiting writers, the creative writing program and the English Department also participated in bringing Disney animator Tom Sito (“Beauty and the Beast," “The Little Mermaid”) to campus to discuss visual storytelling as it relates to traditional and computer animation. With these (and other guests), the creative writing program not only introduced students to significant writers and storytellers but also assisted them in finding a path to transition from their undergraduate efforts to meaningful careers or post-graduate experiences.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAM
A total of 60 students are pursuing the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) certificate from various majors: childhood development, communication studies, English, history, journalism, liberal studies, modern languages and literatures, political science, psychology and recreation administration.

Those earning the TESL certificate have served as Peace Corps volunteers, English language and culture assistants in Spain, English language teachers at various schools in the U.S. and abroad, and graduate and credential students. Interest in the Cal Poly TESL certificate program is at an all-time high with students tutoring at Cuesta College, the San Luis Obispo County Jail, and various other institutions in the area. These individuals gain valuable experience in English language teaching, and many are also compensated for their work.

Professor John Battenburg, director of the TESL certificate program, has been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to teach and conduct research in Monaco in 2016-17.

Graduate students at John Hampsay’s house.
Clark Retires

With a heavy heart, the department bade farewell to Kevin Clark in June. Clark has taught poetry writing and literature in the department since 1988. His extraordinary career and commitment to students is showcased by his winning of the university’s Distinguished Teaching Award in 2002. In addition to his outstanding teaching, he has published two books of poetry (“In the Evening of No Warning” and “Self Portrait with Expletives”), a textbook (“The Mind’s Eye: A Guide to Writing Poetry”), several chapbooks and countless poems. Through his dedicated service on department and campus committees, he made this university a better place for faculty and students. We wish him all the best in his retirement – he surely has earned it!

To honor his tireless promotion of the arts on our polytechnic campus, the English Department is pleased to announce that it will name the department’s poetry writing contest in Clark’s honor. Starting next year, the department will have two named contests: the Al Landwehr Fiction Writing Contest and the Kevin Clark Poetry Writing Contest. The faculty, staff and students can think of no better way to honor Clark’s legacy than naming this contest after him.

John Hampsey paying tribute to Kevin Clark at Clark’s retirement party. Photo: Leslie St. John

TENURE & PROMOTION

Congratulations to the following faculty who have earned tenure and/or promotion this year!

Sophia Forster
Tenure and promotion to associate professor

Brenda Helmbrecht
Promotion to full professor

Dustin Stegner
Promotion to full professor

New Faculty Join Department

JOHN EASTERBROOK
— EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

John Easterbrook earned his master’s and doctorate in English and American literature from the Department of English at New York University. Born in England and raised in the Hudson Valley of New York, Easterbrook earned his bachelor’s in English from Manhattan College. After many years in New York City, he and his wife, Emma, moved to North Carolina in 2013. His research and teaching interests include the environmental humanities and the literature and ecology of early America. Easterbrook’s current scholarship focuses on early American representations of environmental crises. His work appears in “Early American Literature.” An avid backpacker, he looks forward to carrying his copy of John Muir’s “The Mountains of California” as he thru-hikes the John Muir Trail from Yosemite Valley to Mount Whitney.

MIRA ROSENTHAL
— POETRY

Mira Rosenthal is a poet, translator and scholar. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of Houston and a doctorate in comparative literature from Indiana University. Her first book, “The Local World,” won the Wick Poetry Prize. She has received numerous awards and honors, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the PEN American Center, the MacDowell Colony, and Stanford University, where she was a Stegner Fellow in poetry. Her translation of Polish poet Tomasz Różycki’s “Colonies” won the Northern California Book Award and was shortlisted for several other prizes, including the prestigious International Griffin Poetry Prize. Her scholarship on the work of Polish Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz has been supported by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Fulbright Foundation and elsewhere. In addition to writing an ongoing column for the American Poetry Review, she regularly published poems in such journals as Ploughshares, Harvard Review, Slate, PN Review, A Public Space, TriQuarterly and Oxford American. Rosenthal is originally from Northern California and is looking forward to returning to the land of Manzanita and morning fog with her husband and two daughters.

Stay in Touch

Nothing pleases us more than to hear from former students! Send us an email (english@calpoly.edu), drop us a line at english.calpoly.edu/alumni, or join our Alumni Facebook page.
If you are like me, then you love Cal Poly and you look back on your time here as a student with great fondness. We know we had a unique experience. The friendships we made endure through the years, and the education we earned put us in a position to excel in our careers beyond what we might have imagined back in those dorm days. At least part of our success in this world is attributed to the professors that worked so hard to help us.

I feel great pride every time I mention that I am an alumnus of Cal Poly, SLO. I know the opportunities that opened up for me because of my English degree — and I feel a strong debt of gratitude to give back in any way possible. That is why I support the 200 for 200 campaign and the English Department.

When I was a student at Cal Poly in the 1980s, California subsidized most of the cost of the state colleges. My little dorm room in Yosemite Hall cost more than my classes! We were fortunate back then — most of us finished school either debt free or nearly debt free. That is no longer the case. Students today are burdened with costs far higher than we would ever have imagined — and it’s almost impossible to graduate without debt today.

Those of us who benefited from a more generous era have a responsibility to give back (if possible) to the school that helped us get to where we are today. We can make a difference for this generation of students — ensure that the education they receive carries the same value as it did in our day. Please give what you can — and take pride in our school!

The English Department is looking to the future — specifically, how we can continue our legacy of success through increased support of our students and faculty. We want to sustain the excellence our alumni experienced at Cal Poly, and we want to provide even more for our current and future students.

To provide this additional layer of exceptional hands-on education, the English Department and our Alumni Advisory Board are launching a 200 for 200 initiative. Within two years, we aim to have 200 donors commit to our students, and the future of the department, through a gift of $200.

Mehra Gharibian and Miguel Contreras are, without a doubt, extraordinary young men. But we have countless other extraordinary students. Donations from alumni and other supporters can help us provide meaningful opportunities for our students to use the knowledge and skills they have learned as English majors to make a real difference in the world. Our faculty, too, benefit from donor funding. Donors helped send Catherine Waitinas to New York City to conduct research for a series of student-produced videos on Walt Whitman. Similarly, Todd Pierce’s trips to animation archives helped him publish “Three Years in Wonderland,” a book chronicling the building of Disneyland. Supporting faculty research helps our faculty be better scholars and teachers, and raises our profile at the university.

Consider supporting the department’s students and faculty through our 200 for 200 campaign:

- Give Online
- Fill out our giving form and mail your gift to the department: 1 Grand Ave., San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
- Double your contribution with employer-matched giving
We love to hear about what our alumni are up to — both professionally and personally. You can update your contact information and even drop us a line via our website or email english@calpoly.edu.