

Dr. Alicia Juarerro Earns Outstanding Community College Professor of the Year Award

By Elaina Loveland

For as long as she can remember, Alicia Juarerro has always loved learning. Since 1975, this tenured professor of philosophy at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Maryland, has been sharing her passion for learning with students—and her dedication has not gone unnoticed. Juarerro has been named the Outstanding Community College Professor of the Year in the 2002 Professor of the Year Awards, the only annual competition of its kind sponsored by the Council of Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and the Carnegie Foundation.

Juarerro was surprised to learn she won the award. “I really didn't expect it,” she says. “Last year, a Hispanic won so I didn't think it would happen a second year in a row. Not only was I wrong, another Hispanic was selected for the award this year as well,” she says with pride.

Francisco Jiménez, professor Fay Boyle Professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, was named the Outstanding Master's University and College Professor.

Juarerro was born in Cuba. She doesn't remember her first language. “It's hard to say which language I learned first,” she says. “I remember speaking in Spanish, French and English from a very young age and my school was bilingual.”

When Juarerro was 13 years old, she and her family immigrated to the United States as political exiles. Her family made their new home in Miami, Florida.

Whether Juarerro was in Cuba or the United States, one thing stood out loud and clear: “I always loved school,” she says.

Juarerro, who has a close-knit family, decided to stay near her adopted home in Miami to attend college. When she began her undergraduate studies at the University of Miami, Juarerro assumed she would be a political science major. But when she took her first philosophy course, she knew that was what she had to study. “Philosophy took hold of me and never let go,” Juarerro says.

“My parents were upset that I wasn't going to be a political science major. The culture at the time was to help other Cubans out, which naturally led to studying political science—not philosophy,” she explains.

After earning her bachelor's degree, Juarerro impressed the University of Miami philosophy department so much that they awarded her a full fellowship for her master's and doctorate degrees. And she was happy to continue uncovering the mysteries of philosophy through her studies as it had captured her intellectually since her first encounter with the discipline.

But did she ever think of becoming a professor or was it the love of philosophy itself that drove her? Primarily it's been the subject of her academic life that has led her path.

“I could have been a student for the rest of my life, but I had finished the Ph.D. and I couldn't go any higher. Teaching was the next natural thing,” says Juarerro. “It was the mid-70s and there was a glut of teachers. I was very fortunate to get a job.”

Juarerro says her philosophy of teaching is “to teach the best the discipline has to offer in a way that excites and interests students—without sacrificing quality or intellectual rigor.” Challenging a common assumption, she believes that community college students are just as academically capable of as students at four-year colleges and universities. Juarerro’s students run the gamut—in her classes she often has a mix of recent high school graduates, adults who never thought they wanted to pursue higher education, career changers, retired military personnel and senior citizens. Despite the challenge of teaching a nontraditional-age student population, many of whom work full-time jobs during the day before tackling evening courses, Juarerro never lowers her expectations of her students. “The content of the courses I teach—the quality of rigor—is exactly the same as any place else,” she says.

Juarerro has been known to help individual students reach their highest academic potential both in and outside of the classroom. One of her former students, Jane Hauser, now an attorney practicing domestic law in Waldorf, Maryland, remembers taking Professor Juarerro’s logic class in 1997.

“I was taking classes at PGCC to finish my bachelor’s degree at another university and had an opportunity to take one of Professor’s Juarerro’s philosophy courses as a requirement for my four-year degree,” Hauser explains.

“The class was in symbolic logic. A very difficult course and I was one of those students who was used to getting all A’s. In her class it was nearly impossible. I remember studying 22 hours in one week for her course,” she says.

Later in the semester, due to Hauser’s diligence in studying for the course, she ended up leading a class study group. Juarerro took notice of her student’s enthusiasm for mastering the course content. She approached Hauser and asked to her use her skills to teach not only the students in her study group, but to become a logic tutor for the college’s tutoring center.

“Professor Juarerro said the tutoring center desperately needed a tutor for the logic course and encouraged me to apply. I did and officially became the logic tutor,” says Hauser.

Hauser was overjoyed to learn that her former philosophy professor won CASE’s Professor of the Year Award. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a professor who deserves the award more than Professor Juarerro because of her enthusiasm for teaching. She teaches because she truly loves to teach and she wants her students to learn,” she says.

Throughout her academic career, Juarerro has taught courses at numerous institutions besides her home base at Prince George’s Community College. She has made her mark on students at schools such as San Francisco State University, the College of Alameda, Catholic University, and the University of Maryland, College Park. For the past three years, Juarerro has also been teaching courses in philosophy, literature and film at the Collington Episcopal Life Care Community. This past semester she had 70 students enrolled in two courses. “I really enjoy teaching senior citizens,” Juarerro says. “They have wonderful life experiences that contribute to the class and a passion for learning.”

Juarerro teaches courses in introductory philosophy, in ethics, symbolic logic, and philosophy in literature as well as an honors colloquium. She developed the honors colloquium, called “Minds, Brains and Machines,” more than a decade ago and it is one of her favorite courses to teach. When Congress declared the 1990s “The Decade of the Brain,” Juarerro found the perfect opportunity to offer this interdisciplinary course that combines the philosophy of the mind, the

study of the brain and the study of technology in one course. Juarrerro also integrates the study of neurology and computer technology in the colloquium.

Although Juarrerro has been a longtime faculty member at Prince George's Community College, she discovered a newfound notoriety on campus after receiving the Outstanding Community College Professor of the Year Award. Suddenly, she was known by the masses. "People would come up, greet me and say 'You're that professor that won the award,'" she says.

Ronald A. Williams, president of Prince George's Community College, is especially proud of her success. "Professor Juarrerro's dedication, energy and contributions to the college and her students are an inspiration to us all who know the special influence a teacher can have on a student's life," he says.

Juarrerro has established a philosophy scholarship at Prince George's Community College with the \$5000 cash prize money from earning the CASE Award. The Marlene Carpenter Philosophy Scholarship Award is named in honor of the founder and chair of the philosophy department at Prince George's Community College. The scholarship will be awarded once per year in the amount of \$300 to \$500 to an outstanding philosophy student.

"It's the least I could do to give back to the college," Juarrerro says.

Marlene Carpenter, chair and founder of the philosophy department at Prince George's Community College, has known Juarrerro since she hired her 28 years ago.

"She is absolutely marvelous," says Carpenter. "Not only is she an ambassador not only of philosophy, but she is also an ambassador of good will. She is involved internationally—she speaks about philosophical theory and is active in publishing. And she makes a difference at home—like teaching Latinos about finances."

When Carpenter learned that Juarrerro decided to start a scholarship program in her name with the prize money from the award, she was "speechless." "It was completely unexpected. It was a way of saying something to me beyond words. I was so honored...so proud...so thankful," she says.

In addition to teaching, Juarrerro has also gained success in the scholarly publishing world. This success defies a longstanding notion in academe that community colleges only focus on teaching students and aren't beacons for academic research, but that they only focus on teaching. Juarrerro dispelled this myth with her internationally acclaimed book, *Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behavior as a Complex System*, published by MIT Press in 1999. The book was released in paperback in 2002. She is the first community college professor that has been published by MIT Press. Juarrerro is especially interested in the philosophy of the mind; her book is a study of the moral justification of behavior and legal consequences of that behavior.

"What's the difference between a blink and a wink?" she asks. The answer is subtle, but many don't realize that this difference has significant meaning in legal proceedings. "One cannot be held morally responsible for reflexes," she explains.

In *Dynamics in Action*, Juarrerro attempts to account for the difference between a wink and a blink that been largely overlooked in the field of "action theory," the subset of philosophy focused on outlining the distinctions between voluntary and involuntary action.

Juarrero received great praise for her book from many respected scholars and publications including the *International Philosophical Quarterly* and the *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, among others. *The American Journal of Psychology* called it “a new step forward in the complex systems approach to human behavior....a solid contribution to the field.” The success of *Dynamics in Action* verifies that both research *and* pedagogy are priorities in Juarrerro’s academic life, which may be considered a rarity at community colleges.

After being named the Outstanding Community College Professor of the Year, life goes on as usual for Professor Alicia Juarrerro. She teaches. She researches. She writes. She shares her enthusiasm for philosophy with her students and guides them toward their fullest academic potential. She is living life to the fullest. Would she have it any other way? When looking back on her career, Juarrerro says fondly, “I love it. It was definitely the right choice.”

Sidebar

Since 1981, the U.S. Professors of the Year program has rewarded outstanding professors for their dedication to teaching, commitment to students and innovative instructional methods. It is the only national program to recognize college and university professors for their teaching skills. The program is sponsored by CASE and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. For more information on CASE and the U.S. Professors of the Year, please visit www.case.org.