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Illinois Wesleyan Course Focuses on Spanish for Health Care Professionals

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — One day this month Illinois Wesleyan University's Valerie Lambrecht, a sophomore premed major, found herself in a lengthy telephone conversation with a patient who had called Bloomington's Community Health Care Clinic where Lambrecht was volunteering.

The 10-minute conversation was entirely in Spanish, allowing Lambrecht to put into practice the lessons that she and 17 other Illinois Wesleyan students are learning in a new May Term class, "Medical Spanish and Cultural Competency for Health Care."

"Before taking this course, I would never have been confident enough to have that kind of conversation," says Lambrecht. "I also talked with several Spanish-speaking patients who came to the clinic and needed some assistance in communicating with the health professionals."

The experience has caused Lambrecht to reevaluate her postgraduate goals and to consider how she might use her language skills to respond to the pressing need that exists for medical professionals who can communicate in a second language, especially Spanish.

"In addition to exposing the students to medical Spanish, I want the course to get them in tune with Hispanic culture in all its varieties in the United States," says Carolyn Nadeau, associate professor of Hispanic Studies at Illinois Wesleyan. "The class is geared toward nursing and premed students, but we do have students from other disciplines enrolled as well."

In addition to classroom vocabulary and grammar studies, all students are required to serve as interpreters at the Community Health Care Clinic, which serves more than 800 patients, many of whom are Hispanic. Each day during the term, two to three students work shifts at the clinic.

"More exposure would be preferable for building the students' confidence," says Nadeau, "but this is a foot in the door, a step in the right direction."

As Nadeau explains, the language barrier is a major impediment to successful health care in America. "When a patient can't communicate, that patient often can't get service at all or the result can be great frustration," she says. "This is an area that needs significant attention."

Illinois Wesleyan's School of Nursing recently began offering a special program in which students minor in Spanish. Nadeau's May Term course complements that program.

"I've taken seven years of Spanish," says Rachael Stoller, a junior nursing student who has a Spanish minor. "This class has been exceptionally helpful by offering me so much new and specialized vocabulary. I want to practice in a big city where I am confident that I'll need to use my Spanish."

Illinois Wesleyan's May Term is a three-week session during which faculty are encouraged to develop innovative courses which emphasize immersion in learning.

To discuss the course with Professor Nadeau and students, contact either Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.