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Interdisciplinarity and Collaboration at Lawrence University

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Monica Rico, Robert S. French Professor of American Studies and Professor of History at Lawrence University, places a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary work, both within the Humanities and beyond. As an established campus leader, she sees how each discipline on campus works in concert to strengthen the others, and she strongly advocates for the potential of the liberal arts in the twenty-first century.

In support of Rico's visionary imagination, Lawrence has empowered her to develop a Humanities Center to serve both the campus and the wider community.

Rico consistently broadens her focus to pull in more potential avenues for interdisciplinary understanding. This approach informs her teaching of gender history at Lawrence, which includes elements of women's and gender studies in relation to the study of history. Rico also teaches public history, which is history as communicated outside of an academic context. Public history is housed in places such as museums and archives, as well as in oral history collections. These rich and complex sites naturally include a high degree of interdisciplinarity, as well as rich potential for collaborative work.

Teaching regularly in Lawrence's First-Year Studies Program—a signature program at Lawrence which brings together people from across the institution—has offered Rico insights into the ways that students across campus respond to the curriculum, since

she typically doesn't otherwise have the opportunity to engage with those in other disciplines, such as STEM and Conservatory students. Rico says that engaging in writing exercises and class discussions with diverse students in these small classes has allowed her to get to know them as individuals; encountering first-year students from many different disciplines in these ways has enhanced her career.

Valuing Interdisciplinary Work and the Humanities

Rico is steeped in interdisciplinary work through her academic research. One area of focus for Rico is representations of gender in historical texts, as well as how representations of gender and nature intersect in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These explorations naturally lend themselves to interdisciplinary research. During her years at Lawrence, Rico also found herself in a different interdisciplinary space—the Environmental Studies (ES) program. She was the first person in the Humanities to direct ES at Lawrence, and she's rightfully

proud of the work she did in directing this interdisciplinary program for four years; the ES curriculum includes sciences, humanities, and fine arts components.

Rico's leadership roles at Lawrence have enabled her to more strongly envision how all parts of campus work together to create the interconnected whole. One such role was chairing the History department for three years. In fact, Rico recently gave a presentation at the American Historical Society regarding leadership in the History Department. Rico notes that her vantage point as chair offered insights into what was happening in other departments on campus. These insights have been further strengthened by her service on the curriculum and sustainability committees, as well as her participation in a campus task force which focused on preparing students for their post-college lives.

One of the biggest influences on Rico's perspectives about how Lawrence works as a whole was her time recently chairing the task force on general education curriculum

revision. In these meetings, the task force members talked strategically about Lawrence University's mission and unique strengths. They discussed how they want to be part of re-envisioning the liberal arts for the twenty-first century. Rico knows Lawrence is not the only university thinking in these ways, but the campus wants to be part of a dynamic vision for the future, not stuck in past ruts.

Rico recognizes that these times are challenging and stressful for small liberal arts colleges, but she sees this moment as a chance to get excited about possibilities while staying true to the campus values and mission. Lawrence leaders want to address elements that students desire in a university experience; they also want Lawrence to be a place which attracts innovative faculty members. Rico points out that many new PhD graduates—potential faculty new hires—have been steeped in high-impact teaching practices, such as community-based learning, digital

pedagogy, experiential learning, and collaborative learning. These faculty members aren't limited to the old standard of only having readings, papers, mid-terms, and a final exam—and Lawrence wants to be the place that these innovative faculty members want to be. Attracting these faculty members is one part of attracting students, including students who may not have previously considered attending a private institution of higher learning.

Rico notes that part of attracting students to liberal arts colleges like Lawrence is articulating what taking courses and having experiences within the Humanities might mean for them. She offers the example that many potential students are interested in neuroscience, often due to a personal connection. Such students may imagine they will learn everything they need to know about the field in science classes, but Rico states that the Humanities need to be part of these

conversations. As we think about neurology, she notes, questions such as these arise: How can people age well? How can they better understand their own or others' neurodivergence? Rico points out that these are questions better suited to Humanities inquiries, such as within English and Philosophy classes, for example.

Humanities Center

Given Rico's interdisciplinary interests and strong leadership track record, she was the perfect choice to spearhead the development of a Humanities Center which will serve both campus and community. The Center is housed in the newly opened West Campus project, a building situated in Appleton's downtown area which showcases an innovative public-private collaboration between Lawrence University and local community partners. The city's art museum is housed on the first floor, while the second floor houses a multi-disciplinary array of Lawrence programs: in

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addition to the Humanities Center, this floor includes offices and practice rooms for the Conservatory of Music, along with space dedicated to the Math, Computer Science, and Statistics programs. The planners' goal is to generate new kinds of collaborations by having this variety of disciplines grouped in one space. Additionally, this space is distinctively Lawrence's; the school is one of the only liberal arts colleges to boast a true Music Conservatory. Having the Conservatory's offices and practice rooms in this space highlights this unique campus aspect to the larger community.

The West campus project is one example of ways that Appleton civic leaders continue to strive to keep the downtown area alive and thriving. Rico appreciates that Lawrence University wants to be part of that flourishing, particularly in an era when many downtown areas in similar municipalities are struggling. The West Campus project is just

one collaboration between town and gown; Lawrence also opened a Pre-Health Commons nearby; it is a 180,000-square-foot healthcare, housing, retail, and mixed-use community hub "designed to strengthen student connections with classmates, professors, and the surrounding community," according to an August press release. Lastly, the Lawrence University Business and Entrepreneurship Center "serves as a nexus for students to extend career exploration in collaboration with faculty and the community." Each of these projects further advances Lawrence's commitment to realizing a dynamic future vision for the liberal arts in the area.

Within the Humanities Center, Rico aims to focus on interdisciplinary, collaborative work involving Humanities disciplines, and she hopes to make connections for this sort of work within the local Fox Cities community, as well. Rico is currently building awareness and spreading the word about the existence

of the Humanities Center and possibilities for how it can serve various campus and community stakeholders. As a historian, she embraces the Humanities as part of the forward vision for Lawrence.

As Rico connects with stakeholders, she often needs to start by explaining what a Humanities Center is. As the National Humanities Center website states, "The humanities help us understand and interpret the human experience, as individuals and societies." A Humanities Center can facilitate projects which help both students and local community members to gain stronger insights into their own and others' experiences. Rico says that her colleagues don't always immediately see how their work can contribute to interdisciplinary projects, but she is able to envision possibilities and highlight how potential collaborations can benefit all partners involved.

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In one early initiative at the Center, Rico is creating a professional development series for faculty members to learn strategies of incorporating digital humanities in their course work. One example of such inclusion might be assigning the making of a podcast instead of writing a conventional essay. To create this professional development workshop, Rico will work with the people in Lawrence's instructional technology office, along with colleagues in the Center for Teaching Excellence, leveraging resources that the campus already has in place. Rico is also already planning to organize a wide variety of internship programs through the Humanities Center.

As the Center becomes more established, it will also be able to hire interns to help with the work. Rico envisions that they will continue building awareness of the Humanities Center through social media presence and website maintenance. She plans for the interns to also research what other organizations are doing

in their Humanities Centers. She reports that the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes provides a great deal of information that she hasn't yet been able to sort through, so the interns can put together fact sheets of recommendations from the material. Once the Humanities Center has projects up and running, the interns will also support those projects with event planning, preparation, and follow up.

Rico's position at the Center is underwritten by the Associated Colleges of the Midwest's Academic Leadership Fellows program. This program, funded by the Mellon Foundation, supports 10 fellows in two-year terms; participants are tenured Humanities faculty with "demonstrated leadership capabilities, commitments to institutional excellence, and the potential to have a transformative impact at their current or future institutions," according to the program website. Rico's skill set and track record admirably align with the Fellows

program goals, as her work has already had a "transformative impact" at Lawrence.

Each university campus needs leaders who not only see how all of the pieces fit together but who can also articulate the possibilities arising from the mosaic. Rico exemplifies such leadership; her consistent dedication to interdisciplinary collaboration provides an excellent and inspiring model for those at other institutions of higher learning.

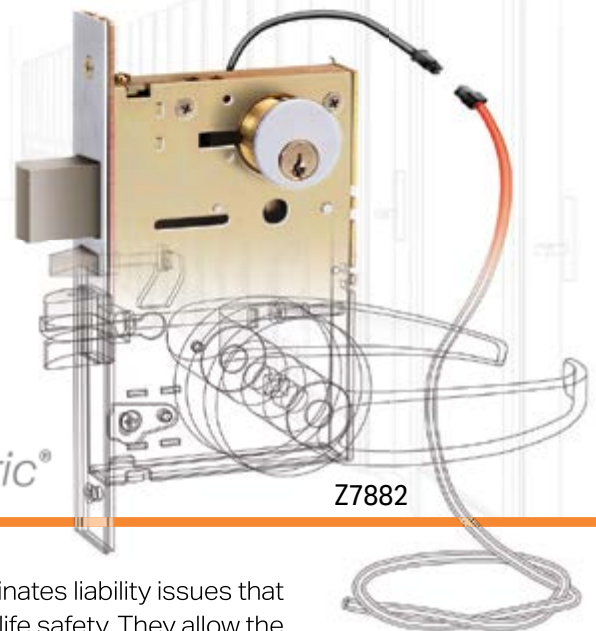


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