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THE "WRITE" CONNECTION

CNU AND COLOMBIAN PEN PALS BRIDGE CULTURES.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | April 10, 2024

Read time: about 4 min

Valeria Cuevas and Lauren Highfield have never met in person. They live on separate continents and speak different languages.

But the two students have formed a strong connection, despite the fact that Cuevas is a student in Colombia and Highfield is a junior at Christopher Newport.

The relationship they have forged is the product of a pen pal initiative started by CNU alumna Sophie Morley, '22 [Political Science](#) and [American Studies](#). Morley, a Fulbright English teaching assistant at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC), developed Amigxs Sin Fronteras (Friends Without Borders) as a way to bridge the cultural gap between students at the two universities, foster global friendships, and sharpen conversational foreign language skills.

"As a Fulbright English teaching assistant, one of our individual tasks is to have a social project. Being passionate about cross-cultural communication, I thought it would be an incredibly rewarding opportunity for both communities if we had a pen pal type exchange to connect Colombian students with CNU students," Morley said.



Sophie Morley, center, sits with students from the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia.

The effort has taken off, with students both at CNU and UPTC lessening the cultural and language barriers that exist between them by writing to one another regularly via email about their worlds.

“This program has undoubtedly changed my worldview,” said Highfield, ‘26 [Spanish](#). “I grew up with very little knowledge of the Spanish speaking world and culture. So, after many years of studying Spanish, my understanding has grown tremendously, and this program has played a major part in that.”

Morley approached the Spanish Department at CNU with the pen pal idea and was connected with Dr. Rocio Gordon, associate professor of Spanish, who embraced the idea and wove it into her advanced Spanish Composition class curriculum. Students in Colombia were paired with pen pals in Gordon's class, and they began communicating.

From there, the relationships flourished, and the cultural differences quickly shrunk, as the students got to know one another, exchanging stories, customs, and thoughts. Several are planning to one day visit their pen pals in person.

“They love it! They enjoy the practice, but they mostly really like sharing their own culture with the UPTC students and learning from them. They share links, pictures, etc.,” Gordon said. “This is an informal communication which gives students more freedom to explore the language in a relaxed way. They don’t have the limitation of, for example, a composition they need to turn in for class: this is a free/open space for practice.

“This is an amazing opportunity for students because they can improve their writing skills in the target language by engaging in informal conversations with people their own age while learning about a different culture,” Gordon said.

Highfield and Cuevas, who is originally from Venezuela, quickly found common ground and now look forward to their correspondence. Their emails focus on everyday life, and touch on topics such as holiday traditions and favorite foods. They often include photographs to show what they are discussing.

In one letter, Highfield, in Spanish, talks about Thanksgiving and Christmas. And Cuerva responds in English:

“Thanksgiving sounds interesting, unfortunately, we don’t have this day in Latin America. The dinner should be delicious. Why the origin of this celebration?

I love Christmas! It is my favorite holiday. In Colombia it is celebrated in a big way. Christmas trees in the United States look very nice. I want one like this. Here in Latin America, we use artificial trees.”

The exchanges shed light on how college students live in other places and frequently compare holiday traditions and different food dishes that are typical in each of their cultures.

“Not only have I made a new friend, but I have enriched my vocabulary and improved my English grammar,” Cuevas said. “I loved teaching my pen pal about my countries: Colombia and Venezuela, since many times people have a wrong perception of them. I learned that the United States is a multicultural country, where influences from different countries are mixed in harmony.

“As for my pen pal, she is very nice, even though we don’t know each other in person, we try to make our conversations enjoyable and improve each other’s writing,” she said.

Highfield said she has also gained a lot from the program in terms of language skills, and in the process, has made a friend. Communicating with Cuevas has been a game changer, opening Highfield’s eyes to new experiences and possibilities beyond the classroom.

“We are only required to write 300 words each on our documents. But Valeria and I always write many pages of conversation. It has been great to be connected with someone in another country who is passionate about foreign languages,” she said. “I have loved getting to know her! Only communicating with one person has helped us have deeper conversations with that person and challenge ourselves to ask questions particular to that person.”

Being part of the program, Cuevas said, has expanded her horizons.

“I would definitely participate again,” she said. “It is an unforgettable and helpful experience. I am grateful to have been selected. I hope that this type of program between universities will continue to be created.”

Hannah Webber, ‘24 [Neuroscience](#), has had an equally insightful experience with her pen pal.

"I have learned a lot about my partner and Colombia, which has been fascinating and fun. We have also exchanged numbers so we can stay in contact after the semester is over," she said. "I feel like I have made a true friend."

For Mariam Acerao, a student at UPTC, Amigxs Sin Fronteras, finding common interests and having exchanges with her CNU pen pal has proven both interesting and enjoyable.

"This exchange was such an amazing experience where I could improve my American culture view, reshape stereotypes, and know better about American customs and traditions, as well as challenge myself at the time of giving feedback in Spanish," Acero said.

Morley is thrilled that her idea is having such a positive impact.

"I believe this program has accomplished the main goals for this exchange: cross-cultural communication, practical language usage, deeper understanding of each other's cultures," she said. "However, beyond this, I believe that real friendships have been cultivated for some of the students, and knowing this makes me feel proud and gratified."

Being able to involve CNU students, she said, has made the effort even more gratifying.

"I think it's incredibly important to stay connected to your alma mater, and I am a firm believer in paying it forward. The CNU community, more specifically the [Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures](#), has undoubtedly contributed greatly toward my educational, professional and personal success; thus I had little to no hesitation to reach out when this idea came to my mind. I hope that as I continue to learn and grow as a young professional, I can continue to give back to my fellow Captains."
