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Austin College staff and students win Fulbright awards

May 30, 2009—Austin College faculty members Ivette Vargas-O'Bryan, associate professor of religious studies, and Kevin Simmons, professor of economics, have been awarded Fulbright Scholar grants to be used during their sabbaticals in 2009 and 2010. Vargas-O'Bryan and Simmons are two of approximately 1,100 U.S. faculty and professionals who will travel abroad through the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program.

The professors weren't the only members of the AC family recognized by Fulbright this year though. AC graduates Cherie Oertel '09 of Flower Mound and Sophia Kuiper '08 ('09 Master of Arts in Teaching) Midland have accepted Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship awards in Spain for 2009-2010.

Vargas-O'Bryan's teaching grant will be used for teaching a course entitled "Religions and Society in Asia" at City University of Hong Kong in the fall 2009.

She will also be completing research in Tibet and China for a book on the interrelationship between Tibetan medicine and religion in the religious lineages of a Kashmiri Buddhist nun, popular in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition from the 11th century to present day.

"Teaching at a Chinese academic institution will help me build relationships with colleagues in China that could potentially lead to collaborative work and future study abroad opportunities for faculty and students," Vargas-O'Bryan said. "This opportunity came at a critical time with Austin College's focus on global education. I am very excited to network with area scholars at City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, and several institutions in Tibet."

She also will be organizing a panel and presenting at the International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine Conference September 7-11 in Bhutan on Tibetan and Himalayan medicine and religion. Vargas-O'Bryan came to Austin College in 2003 after obtaining her Ph.D., from Harvard University and a bachelor of arts degree from Barnard College.

Simmons will use his Fulbright research grant during the spring semester 2010 conducting research at the International Center for Geohazards in Oslo, Norway. "The International Center for Geohazards (ICG) carries out research on the assessment, prevention and mitigation of geohazards, including risk of landslide in soil and rock due to rainfall, flooding, earthquakes and human intervention, and the geological risks in deep waters, especially underwater slides," according to the ICG Web site.

Simmons also will be working with the U.S. Geological Survey before and after his Fulbright research in Norway and hopes for continued collaborative work with the federal agency that can involve Austin College students. "Most of my research has been on wind hazards," he said. "This gives me the opportunity to expand my research on economics and natural hazards into a different type of hazard. Any time I can broaden my research agenda, it positively impacts what I can do in the classroom."

Simmons came to Austin College in 2003 after earning his Ph.D. from Texas Tech University, his master of business administration degree from Dallas Baptist University and his bachelor of business administration degree from the University of Texas at Arlington.

Oertel, a psychology major with a Spanish minor, will be teaching in the Valencia region of Spain from September 2009 to June 2010. Oertel's preparation for this opportunity included Spanish classes on campus, a 2008 JanTerm in Costa Rica, and the spring 2008 semester studying abroad in Chile. "Both of my study abroad experiences were helpful in the essays and Fulbright application process because I could speak sincerely about my interest in learning about other cultures," she said.

Kuiper, a religion major with a Spanish minor, will follow in the footsteps of her older sister, Nicole Kupier, a 2000 graduate of Austin College through the Fulbright Program. "My sister did a Fulbright research fellowship to Spain after she graduated, so that's how I initially found out about the program," Kupier said.

She will spend September 2009 through June 2010 as an English teaching assistant in Madrid, Spain. Kupier said her Spanish minor, the Austin College Teacher Program, and experiences studying abroad, such as a semester in Mexico City, in high school and teaching English in El Salvador during the 2007 summer through an Austin College Lilly grant have prepared her for this opportunity. She plans to return to the U.S., obtain bilingual certification, and become an elementary teacher.

A third Austin College student, Laura Echols who graduated in 2009 with a from the Master of Arts in Teaching program, was offered a French government English teaching assistantship, administered through Fulbright, but was unable to accept the award for personal reasons.