Exploring Language, Justice, and Identity

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EXPLORING LANGUAGE, JUSTICE, AND IDENTITY

World language educators from across the country convened at Dordt College in April for the 27th annual Christian Association of World Languages (CAWL) conference.

The conference featured the usual assortment of speakers and sessions, but this year was unusual for the number of students in attendance. Dordt language students turned out in force, and over the course of the two-day event, many of them sat in on presentations of academic research and scholarship, discussing and reflecting alongside scholars from sister institutions of Dordt College.

"Some sessions had up to 40 students," says Rikki Heldt, Dordt professor of language studies and this year's conference organizer. "There were sometimes more students in the room than conference attendees." Heldt encouraged her students to attend sessions that intrigued them and then reflect in writing on what they learned.

This year's conference theme was "Language, Justice, and Identity," and Heldt says students were especially responsive to sessions exploring the relationship between language study and social justice.

"Presentations that touched on issues related to justice resonated deeply with students and with questions they're asking in their own lives and classes," Heldt says.

Students were challenged to consider the value of short-term mission projects, for example, and to reflect on their motivations for language study and travel overseas.

"Sometimes these trips are more harmful than helpful, and students interested in missions-based study abroad programs were reflecting together about what it means to do that well," Heldt says.

Dr. Leendert van Beek, Dordt language studies professor and a conference presenter, also encouraged his students to attend conference sessions. He says a presentation about teaching today's generation of millennials led to a lively conversation among students.

"The students felt somewhat mischaracterized and resisted some of the presenter's conclusions," says van Beek. "They became vocal during the discussion, raising questions and offering constructive feedback."

The presenter responded by inviting students to submit their reflections in writing to help her fine-tune her research and conclusions.

"It was a great example of teachers and language learners learning from each other," says Heldt.

The conference also gave students and scholars an opportunity to explore the rich relationship between language and culture and to consider how that relates to their calling as Christians.

"Language learning is as much about learning a culture as it is about vocabulary and verb tense," says Heldt, who notes that language study, paired with rigorous attention to cultural and historical context, is a way to facilitate authentic cross-cultural relationships.

"If a student travels to Nicaragua, for example, and hasn't studied the history of American political and military involvement in Central and South America, it's easy to gloss over the pain of that history and those injustices," she says. "I want students to consider how to use their language skills to be justice seekers and, in seeking justice, to create partnerships with the host culture by establishing authentic relationships."