

RESEARCH ON CAMPUS: Interview with a Haas Scholar



Haas Scholar Zachary O'Hagan working with language consultants Lino Huanío Cabudiva and Alicia Huanío Cabudiva. Photo courtesy of the Haas Scholars Program.

UC Berkeley's commitment to research is visible even at the undergraduate level, given the unique variety of courses, support, and programs available. The Robert and Colleen Haas Scholars Program, founded in 1997, and housed in the Office of Undergraduate Research, is one such opportunity open to UC Berkeley students from all disciplines and departments. Each year, 20 undergraduates are given the funding and personal support to carry out original research immediately prior to, and during, their senior year. The Haas Scholars Program culminates in a research conference where the Scholars share the fruits of their labor with peers, mentors, and the public.

The *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* spoke with Zachary O'Hagan, a 2010-2011 Haas Scholar and Linguistics major, who was delighted to share his experience with the program. His project, sponsored by Professor Lev Michael, is entitled "Uncovering the Genesis of Omagua: A Contact Language of Peruvian Amazonia."

BUJ: How did you come up with your research project? What were your goals, and how do you hope your project is received?

ZO: I began work on the Omagua language via a URAP project started up by my mentor, Lev Michael, in Spring 2009. We worked to digitize and parse a series of story notebooks written in Omagua and Spanish, and to develop grammatical analyses from them. Carrying out linguistic fieldwork had always been a larger aim of that project, for which my advisor received a National Science Foundation grant; however, that could only fund three of the four Berkeley students who were working on Omagua at the time. I wrote my Haas proposal with the aim of being able to fund myself to spend an equivalent two months in San Joaquín de Omaguas, Peru (SJQ). The goals of our research in SJQ were threefold: (1) expand our current dictionary with additional lexical items; (2) check old and develop new grammatical analyses via the elicitation of linguistic data from Omagua speakers; and (3) transcribe old and create new audio recordings of the spoken language.

The work I have done for my Honors thesis (and Haas) subsequently has been one step removed from the typical results of language documentation (e.g., creating a full dictionary, writing a grammar, etc.). The goals for my

present work are to utilize the increase in reliable Omagua data, in conjunction with extant data on a closely related sister language, Kokama-Kokamilla, in order to delimit the ways that Proto-Omagua-Kokama is grammatically similar to a particular language family, Tupí-Guaraní, whose member languages are spoken throughout Brazil and into other countries in South America, particularly Paraguay and Bolivia in the South and French Guyana in the North. This is relevant to determining the linguistic origins of Omagua, as well as to charting the interaction of ethnic populations in the region before the arrival of Europeans.

BUJ: How did the Haas Scholars Program support your research?

ZO: Haas provided the financial support for all my trip expenditures: airfare, lodgings, food, equipment, supplies, etc. It would not have been possible to join an already extant, well-funded research team without this support. Later on the program structured a series of meetings and practice-talks to aid us in maintaining progress on our work. I have met some terrific friends from this group of scholars!

BUJ: Is there a moment that particularly encapsulates your research experience?

ZO: We went to live in SJQ for two months expecting to work with what we thought was the last remaining speaker of Omagua, Arnaldo Huanaquiri Tuisima, now aged 78. However, in the early weeks of working with him, he mentioned to me one afternoon that, when he was writing the Omagua story notebooks, and forgot a word, he would go ask his cousin! I immediately inquired more about his cousin, and within a week, we were working with two additional speakers of Omagua, the cousin and his sister, Lino and Alicia Huanío Cabudiva. In total, we ended up working with five speakers, and know of two more who may potentially work with us in the future. The quality of documentation of severely endangered languages often rests heavily on the absolute number of speakers, and it often requires a patience and diligence not needed in other fieldwork situations to grow a sufficient speaker base so as to make the documentation as comprehensive as possible. I hope to apply the same outlook in searching for speakers of two other languages this coming summer, Yameo and Taushiro.

BUJ: *What were some of your greatest successes and/or challenges? Why?*

ZO: I think by far the greatest success was the discovery of

additional speakers of Omagua, without which, as we found out later on, our documentation of the language would have been extremely impoverished. The greatest challenges derived from living in a village in the jungle for two months. To reach SJQ, one has to fly to Iquitos from Lima, travel by bus an hour southwards along a stretch of a 60km highway, and then hike for about 2.5 hours eastwards to the village, which lies on the Amazon River. There is no plumbing or running water, and intermittent electricity. Our lodgings were made of plank walls and a sheet metal roof. Carrying out emotionally and intellectually challenging linguistic work in this environment was initially difficult, but I know that my colleagues and I will have become better field linguists, and better linguists generally, because of it.

BUJ: *How has being a Haas Scholar impacted you, and how might you use this experience in the future?*

ZO: My involvement with the Haas program is the first time that I have attempted to independently fund research that I wanted to carry out. In general, it has made me much more aware than previously as to the sheer number of avenues there are for finding institutional/financial/organizational support for research, and I hope to

apply that knowledge for furthering documentation work in the future.

Additionally, the program has provided the impetus for me to carry out a very involved research project, the intellectual and logistical skills from which I will be able to map on to other projects in the future.

Lastly, as a member of a cohort of eighteen other undergraduate scholars, I learned valuable lessons in critiquing others' work in a constructive manner, and finding common threads in the work of disparate disciplines.

***BUJ:** Has conducting your own research changed or nuanced your views of the social sciences and humanities?*

ZO: I think one could say that conducting my own research in this interdisciplinary context has actually broadened my view of the

humanities, despite the very discipline-specific nature of my own work. I have found that individuals working in nominally different departments are often talking about the same people, have similar working theories and assumptions, and are interested by very similar social phenomena out there in the world. I found ties between Celtic Studies and Linguistics, Sociology and Geography, and Art Practice and Political Science, to name just a few. That colleges of Arts & Humanities can be so large I think begins to obscure the otherwise unifying framework and subject matter of many of their subdisciplines. The Haas Scholars program goes a long way in showing young, emergent scholars that this in fact does not have to be the case.

By Carine de la Girond'arc

To learn more about the Haas Scholars Program, its past scholars, and application process, please visit
http://research.berkeley.edu/haas_scholars/index.html