

Meet the Prof: Carmen Heider

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The following faculty Q&A was submitted by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Advocacy Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate. Joseph Gemin, professor of communication, wrote the introduction.

I am delighted to introduce my friend and colleague, Carmen Heider, to the community of northeastern Wisconsin. Carmen teaches classes in rhetorical theory and criticism primarily for the Department of Communication. She has earned a reputation for being a superb colleague, a team player with a great sense of humor, and one of the most demanding and intellectually provocative instructors in our department.

Her genuine concern with the welfare of others should also be listed among her attributes. Nowhere is her blend of intellectual rigor and compassion better demonstrated than in her dedication to service learning. Dr. Heider's successes in this area have led her to develop a course at Taycheedah Correctional Institution. You can learn more about her work with prison inmates and other rare opportunities she provides her students in this profile.

How did you find your way to UW Oshkosh?

A joint appointment in Communication and Women's Studies drew me away from an instructor position at SUNY Albany. The opportunity to teach in my two emphasis areas at UW Oshkosh seemed like a perfect fit. I had heard good things about the UW System, and I was impressed by the faculty and students. I was also excited about being back in the Midwest and within a day's drive of Nebraska, where I grew up.

Why did you choose to go into your field?

In high school I had an excellent teacher who sparked my interest in symbols and representations. I became fascinated by literary criticism. I was finally hooked by the rhetoric courses I took as an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

After I graduated, I kept thinking about what I learned in one of my courses, "Social and Political Influences of Language on Society." Four years later, I started my master's program at Texas A&M University and then went on to Penn State for my doctoral degree, where I also earned a graduate minor in women's studies. What most interests me is how symbols (language and images) function to shape our understanding of issues, events, our identities and our cultures.

What is your favorite thing about UW Oshkosh?

There are great opportunities to integrate service-learning and community-based education projects into

my regular classes on campus, including study abroad trips and an Inside-Out course, which established a peer relationship between my students and prison inmates. I am most passionate about social justice, especially in relation to women, and I have been fortunate to be able to share those projects with UW Oshkosh students.

What is the professional accomplishment of which you are most proud?

Inside-Out is a national curriculum developed by Lori Pompa at Temple University, and in 2008, I went through a training institute in Philadelphia. This last year, I was able to start the first Inside-Out Prison Exchange program in Wisconsin at Taycheedah Correctional Institution. I brought together 10 prisoners (“inside students”) and 10 UWO undergraduates (“outside students”) for a semester-long course.

Students (and I) all learned together in an environment based on equality and respect. We read and discussed books and articles that focused on women, incarceration and communication; in addition, the students, in small and large groups, developed a paper that proposed a model facility for women in the Wisconsin prison system.

Our final combined class session was very moving; we had a formal program and invited administrators from UW Oshkosh, Taycheedah Correctional Institution and the Department of Corrections. Two students spoke on behalf of their peers, and we concluded by presenting certificates to all of the students. It was a truly amazing experience and the type of class that stays with you long after it is completed. I hope to teach it again soon.

What leadership or service activities are you involved in?

I currently serve as Communication Studies Area Coordinator, which is one of two areas in the Department of Communication. We recently revised and updated our curriculum, which was a major project. Two years ago I served as Interim Director of African American Studies, and I currently serve on the steering committees for Women’s Studies, African American Studies and Social Justice. I am also involved in the Diversity Committee and Faculty Senate.

What is the most common misperception about what you do?

The term “rhetoric” is often used to describe empty or negative messages. But the scholarly study of rhetoric is rooted in a rich history dating as far back as Ancient Greece and Rome. There is a common misperception about what the study of rhetoric entails. Rhetoric provides us tools to understand how we are persuaded, to critique arguments, to identify fallacies of reasoning, and to understand how language functions in our lives and our society.

These types of critical-thinking skills are very important today, especially given the multitude of media and internet messages to which we are exposed. As a prominent scholar in my field has noted, the study of rhetoric is necessary for democracy to flourish.

What is the most exciting project you are working on right now?

A sabbatical appointment enables me to interview women in prison to learn more about how they

understand their prison experiences. It has been interesting and exciting to hear these women's stories since they are often dehumanized by the media and the public.

My plan is to use rhetorical analysis to illuminate the ways in which they talk about their lives. I hope to gain insight into how we can best meet their needs while they serve their time. The United States has the highest prison population in the world, and while men constitute the largest percentage of prisoners, it is women — and women of color in particular — who comprise the fastest growing segment of our prison population. I hope this project will also yield ideas for how we might be more proactive in keeping women out of prison in the first place.

How does what you research help you to be an effective teacher?

The two are always intertwined. My prior scholarship focused on the 19th century women's rights movement. When I teach "Rhetoric of the U.S. Women's Movement," it is grounded in my research. The Inside-Out class I teach overlaps in many ways with my research sabbatical. Knowing more about women in prison enables me to educate inside and outside students about issues related to incarceration in Wisconsin and the United States.

In addition, when inside students see their experiences reflected in a larger body of literature, it provides them with a broader perspective and invites them to see their potential as college students. I also teach two research methods courses, so all of my research projects provide me with a better understanding of the available methodologies, along with "real life" examples to use in class.

Describe some ways your department serves Northeastern Wisconsin.

Two of our recent communication faculty hires each work with local organizations and businesses. One of my colleagues recently worked with Oshkosh Corporation, and she also teaches with the Center for New Learning, which is focused on community outreach. Another colleague has worked with a number of local non-profit agencies, including the Boys & Girls Club, in one of her courses. Everyone benefits from partnerships with agencies and organizations in the local community

Tell us about your family.

My partner, Paul, is a criminal defense attorney in Fond du Lac. We met in Wisconsin and got married in Yellowstone National Park. We have been married for six years. My parents now live in Omaha, and my sister, brother-in-law and niece also live there. We are all Husker fans (except for Paul, who is partial to the Badgers).

What are your hobbies?

I love to travel — and I love to plan trips (study abroad and my own vacations). My favorite thing to do is hike in the mountains and canyons of the west. Glacier National Park and the Grand Canyon are two of my favorite hiking destinations. I also hiked the Samaria Gorge in Crete and part of the Mount Kilimanjaro Marangu trail in Tanzania.

I like to work out with Russian kettlebells, and of course, I follow the Nebraska Cornhuskers football and

volleyball teams.

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