

## **CHAPS – Many Disciplines, One Goal: Dr. Sonia Hernandez and Dr. Russell Skowronek**

Mar 19th, 2012 by dayoung

The word has a Texas flavor to it. Chaps – the leather garment worn by cowboys to protect their legs from thorns and cattle – is a catchy moniker for Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools. CHAPS has a host of functions: it is the reason for UTPA’s first multi-disciplinary course, it involves local school districts engaging students in local history by way of excavations and excursion, and it is training K-12 teachers to encourage STEM education as exciting and interesting. The CHAPS program is headed by the Anthropology Department’s Dr. Russell Skowronek and History’s Dr. Sonia Hernandez. Those two and their fellow colleagues on the CHAPS team brought in a recent \$100,000 grant from the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) to continue the project.

One of CHAPS’ big successes was an academic class taught last fall with three different course numbers: it’s a history course, an anthropology course and a graduate anthropology course. What’s more, it had six instructors from the disciplines of archeology, anthropology, biology and history. Besides Skowronek and Hernandez, part of the CHAPS team including Dr. Margaret Dorsey (Anthropology and Curator of the Border Studies Archive), Dr. Juan Gonzalez (Physics and Geology), Professor Bobbie Lovett (Anthropology), and Dr. Kenneth “Rod” Summy (Biology) pitched in to create and teach a curriculum spanning four disciplines and three colleges. The course engaged students in real research – out in the field doing digs, interviews and data collection. The core of the course revolved around the Norquest family. Arriving in the early days of the Valley’s agricultural development, the Norquests like to relate that they once farmed the land where UTPA now sits. The students’ job was to create an oral history of the family, analyze archaeological materials from the property, map certain landmarks using GIS (geographic information systems) technologies and explore the geology and changing biology of the land over the years. They built on previous research done by earlier students, such as an oral history interview with family scion Carrol Norquest Jr. The student researchers examined the history of the land from the days when it was sparsely inhabited by Native Americans, through the first Spanish settlers and the land grants from the King of Spain, to the rise of commercial agriculture to today’s bustling city of Edinburg.



A CHAPS student works at a dig site on the Norquest family property. UTPA Photo by Josue "Chachi" Esparza

The diversity of Indian, Anglo, Mexican and Mexican American residents who have lived on the Norquest land over many years points to a rich heritage – something the teachers in local school districts can bring to their students. The Edinburg, Hidalgo, PSJA and La Joya schools, plus the St. Joseph Catholic School have brought over three hundred middle school students to a greater knowledge of their legacy, as well as seeing how studying sciences or the humanities can be a rewarding and fun pursuit.

The new grant fits into the [Bridging Cultures](#) program of the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#). As always, grantors such as the NEH want findings published – a requirement that will be happily met when Drs. Skowronek and Hernandez edit a book on the project students' findings. Of course, stories about CHAPS, the research – and about the students will be updated on the CHAPS web site and used for presentations at conferences and to the community.

The grant will allow the project to continue as well as fund another course to be taught in the fall of 2012 centering on another Valley family. Some funds will also be used to create and conduct teacher workshops in the four school districts, thereby spreading cultural awareness to younger students. Ultimately, CHAPS will help to “create archaeologically and historically literate citizens who are aware of their local cultural and natural history and of its importance to the future economic development of the Rio Grande Valley.”