

A photograph of two dancers from the Xiuhtcoatl Danza Azteca performing at the annual Carnaval San Francisco. They are wearing large, elaborate headdresses made of many colorful feathers (red, blue, purple, orange) and intricate woven patterns. The dancer on the left is a woman with a leopard-print headband, and the dancer on the right is a man with a green and gold headband. They are both looking forward with serious expressions.

Members of Xiuhtcoatl Danza Azteca in San Francisco at the annual Carnaval San Francisco.

(Photo by Carnaval.com Studios.)

LANGUAGE

Revitalizing Nahuatl at Berkeley

By Julia Byrd

Nahuatl is among the most widely spoken of nearly 70 living Indigenous languages officially recognized by Mexico's government, with almost 1.4 million speakers today. Many Nahuatl words have been incorporated into English, including avocado, chocolate, chile, coyote, and tomato.

For years, students have approached the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley requesting for-credit Nahuatl courses on campus. In Spring 2018, CLAS connected with its counterpart at the University of Utah to foster a teaching collaboration in Nahuatl. Utah's CLAS had a preexisting partnership with Mexico's Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ, Zacatecas Institute for Teaching and Research in Ethnology). Together, we set up a distance-learning, for-credit course in Nahuatl for UC Berkeley students, taught by an IDIEZ instructor in Utah. For Indigenous and less-commonly taught languages, distance learning greatly multiplies access to the limited number of experienced instructors.

The course's design proved prescient when the pandemic changed our world and education transitioned to "remote." We offered Beginning Nahuatl in Fall 2020, taught by Abelardo de la Cruz de la Cruz, a Nahuatl native speaker from Tepoxteco, Chicontepec, Veracruz, and a Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology. The excitement about the course was evident: 12 students enrolled, including three from UC Merced. A second semester course followed in Spring 2021.

One of the students who has benefited from the Nahuatl courses is Everardo Reyes, a first-generation Ph.D. student at UC Berkeley in Ethnomusicology. Everardo's primary research interest is how Indigenous musicians and activists in the Americas use sound to challenge settler-colonial borders around race, identity, nationality, gender, and sexuality. Knowledge of Nahuatl is necessary for his research, and CLAS is proud to be able to offer more courses next year.

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