

## Inception of the Woodcock–Muñoz Foundation Cuba Outreach Project

The Woodcock–Muñoz Foundation (WMF) Cuba Outreach Project is a special relationship between the WMF and the University of Havana, Department of Psychology, and the Cátedra de Estudios sobre Discapacidad (Center of Disability Studies) in Havana, Cuba. Although Cuba reports some of the best educational statistics in Latin America, Cuban psychologists work with limited access to contemporary assessment tools and little knowledge of current intelligence theories such as the CHC theory of human cognitive abilities. Based on a mutual interest in contemporary theory and methods of cognitive ability assessment, the WMF Cuba Outreach Project was developed in order to provide current cognitive and academic assessments to Cuban psychology professionals.

The Woodcock–Muñoz Foundation (WMF) announces the expansion of its outreach programs with the implementation of the WMF Cuba Outreach Project in association with the University of Havana and the Cátedra de Estudios sobre Discapacidad (Center of Disability Studies) in Havana, Cuba.

Since its inception in 2001, the WMF has supported the development and maintenance of native-language cognitive ability assessment tools in several Eastern European countries that have been without modern psychological assessment measures for decades. Inspired by the successful European outreach projects, the WMF Board of Directors approved a preliminary research project to determine if a similar need existed in Cuba. A special project team was organized consisting of Fredrick Schrank, the WMF executive director, and two Spanish-speaking school psychologists from the United States who contributed a wealth of experience and cross-cultural communication skills: Melissa Marsh and Patricio Romero. The project team received a license from the United States Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, to travel to Cuba for the purposes of educational collaboration.

Phase I of the Cuba Outreach Project began with a series of presentations by the WMF project team to university professors and psychometric examiners in Havana. This phase of the project occurred in August, 2009. The project team provided current assessment materials and conveyed information regarding



**WMF Team & Cátedra leaders (L to R):** Blas Eduardo Mora Maestre, Melissa Marsh, Patricio Romero, Fredrick A. Schrank, and María Teresa García Eligio de la Puente.

contemporary cognitive ability assessment practices to Cuban psychologists and other professional examiners. The Cátedra was provided with two copies of the *Batería III Woodcock–Muñoz™: Pruebas de habilidades cognitivas y Pruebas de aprovechamiento (Batería III)*, the Spanish adaptation and translation of the *Woodcock–Johnson III® Tests of Cognitive Abilities* and *Tests of Achievement*. The *Batería III* is designed to measure basic psychological processes and academic achievement and was considered an appropriate instrument to share with Cuban

professionals for several reasons: All testing materials are in Spanish; the normative group consisted of Spanish-only speakers; and the norming sample included persons of Cuban descent.

Phase II of the project is set to take place in New York City in February 2010. Two of the WMF Phase I team members, Dr. Romero and Ms. Marsh, will meet with professional personnel from the Cátedra to provide training in *Batería III* administration and score-interpretation. The Cuban government has authorized the travel of the Cátedra's staff to the United States to obtain the training.

## La Cátedra de Estudios sobre Discapacidad

Located in the center of Cuba's capital, the Cátedra de Estudios sobre Discapacidad (Center of Disability Studies) is a conduit for mental health services and patient care in Havana.

An extension of the psychology department of the University of Havana, the Cátedra provides services free of charge to individuals with disabilities. The Cátedra owes its creation, development, and maintenance to two key figures, Dra. María Teresa García Eligio de la Puente and Licencia Blas Eduardo Mora Maestre. Both are members of the staff of the University of Havana: Dra. García is a faculty member of the Department of Psychology; Licencia Mora is a licensed vocational trainer.

### Origins & Inception

Over strong Cuban coffee, Dra. García and Licencia Mora described for the WMF team the inspiration and inception of the clinic. The story began, of course, with the two clinic leaders enjoying Cuban coffee with colleagues and friends. As the professionals chatted



Dra. García describes the utilization of art therapy in the Cátedra's treatment of clients.



Patricio Romero delivers a lecture to the professionals at the Cátedra.

that day, they spoke of the need for a clinic that would serve individuals with disabilities who lacked access to psychological services. Second, they remembered that the university psychology department had conducted more than 25 years of work in disability studies and realized that among the faculty members and individuals with close university affiliations, they possessed the required professional credentials to begin the endeavor. Last, they discussed the requirement for a suitable space to house the clinic. The group of professionals appreciated the exceptional regard of the Cuban people for individuals with disabilities, and they found motivation in their longing to fulfill unaddressed community needs by establishing the clinic as quickly as possible.

### Vision becomes Reality

Dra. García and Licencia Mora told the WMF team that the University of Havana had provided them with a huge storage area for the envisioned clinic. They laughed as they described their hours of work to prepare the clinic—removing old stored materials—during their so-called “free time” in the midst of teaching, mentoring, and researching. As a consequence of their work and with the contributions of other professionals, the Cátedra de Estudios sobre Discapacidad (Center of Disability Studies) was established in March of 2004.

The WMF visitors found that the formerly barren storage building had been transformed into a colorful, open space containing comfortable furnishings, shelves of books, internet-accessible computers, and vivid client artwork lining the walls. From very humble beginnings, the Cátedra has developed into one of the most respected mental health clinics in Havana. It has become a source of pride in the Cuban mental health care delivery system, especially for the Cuban psychologists and assessment professionals who practice there.

## Clinic Staff

Dra. Garcia and Licencia Mora are the dynamic individuals who handle the clinic's administrative responsibilities. Dra. Garcia administers psycho-educational assessments, provides psychological therapy to students with disabilities, supervises psychology graduate interns, and conducts research in the study of disabilities and associated issues. She finds her true calling in motivating staff and clients to "think big" and plan accordingly.

Licencia Mora conducts vocational assessments in order to identify and recommend vocational settings appropriate for individuals with disabilities. He also provides essential organizational skills, maintains systems level operations, ensures that equipment, files, and materials are readily available to staff, and extends courteous care to staff, clients, and visitors alike. As a person with impaired hearing, Licencia Mora possesses personal insight in recognizing and meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Other clinic staff include psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and vocational trainers. The clinic's multidisciplinary approach to client-care emphasizes the philosophy of incorporating art therapy into treatment plans. For students with limited expressive language skills, art therapy is the preferred approach of clinic therapists because of the empowerment experienced when students achieve meaningful results through manipulation of art materials. Clinic staff find that these clients demonstrate measurable progress in a shorter time than those in more traditional treatments. The therapists also believe that the client's emotions can be successfully revealed through art. Art is not only a integral focus of this clinic but is a critical element of the Cuban nation's education curriculum. The visual arts are essential to the Cuban people and play a vital role in the history of their country.

When discussing specific assessment instruments available for administration at the clinic, Dra. Garcia proudly displayed a photocopied issue of the Wechsler-Bellevue Intelligence Scale. The 1938 copyright date confirmed the lack of contemporary materials available

to clinic psychologists, which may be due, in part, to international sanctions that have prevented collaboration between universities and professionals in Cuba.

Despite the limitations, Dra. Garcia and other clinic staff had taken it upon themselves to create local norms for the Wechsler-Bellevue by conducted testing in local schools and neighboring clinics to obtain data on the performance of Cuban people. The innovative attempt to create an instrument suitable for use with their population is laudable.



Dra. Garcia and Patricio Romero pose at the entrance to the Center, which was transformed from a storage building.

## Clinic Theory

Clinic evaluations utilize what psychological literature would call strength-based assessments in which evaluations are intended to determine an individual's strengths. This is consistent with current practice in the United States where psychologists focus on determining

**Respect for Diversity** (*Por el Respeto a la Diversidad*), motto of the Havana Center of Disability Studies, embodies its objectives:

**Research:** The professionals of the center conduct studies and systematic research related to disabilities and associated fields.

**Education:** The center offers doctoral and masters programs as well as distance learning courses for both nationals and internationals. It supports scientific and educational work of associations for people with disabilities and organizations that serve care-providers. Extracurricular courses are intended to motivate students to further study and to consider potential careers in the field of disabilities.

**Direct Services:** The clinic administers multidisciplinary services to individuals with disabilities and their families. Clients include persons with developmental or intellectual disabilities, with physical impairments, or with psychiatric disorders; ages range from adolescence to older adults. The center also provides support to undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities.

**National and International Development:** The center is working to expand relations national and international relations: with scientific and academic institutions, with similar clinics and centers, with government agencies, and with private organizations. Every two years, the clinic convenes "La Conferencia Internacional de Psicología Especial," the Special International Conference of Psychology.



Dra. Garcia presents a certificate of appreciation to Melissa Marsh.

student-strengths in order to facilitate interventions. The practice of concentrating on the strength of the individual with disabilities is rooted in the core values of Cuba society. The Cuban people view themselves positively; they do not surround themselves with material possessions nor do they focus on the negative aspects of life. In the same way, Cátedra assessments focus on the positive achievements accessible to individuals, identify strengths, and supply service providers with appropriate care recommendations.

This strength-based approach is similar to the method utilized by the group of friends and colleagues who dreamed a respected clinic into existence. They were not people who simply sat around and talked about the negative aspects of their society and the lack of facilities for persons with disabilities. Instead, they became a group of professionals who combined action with intelligence. They cleared their busy schedules and dedicated themselves to renovating an eyesore

of a storage space into a first-rate clinic. The Cátedra serves individuals with disabilities, provides clinical practicum opportunities for graduate students, and gives professionals a modern facility in which to accomplish their vocations.

## Final Impressions and Summary

The WMF guests were impressed with the clinic and described the staff as remarkable individuals who dedicate their time and services to serving those most in need. They noted in particular the skill and creativity of Dra. Garcia and Licencia Mora in bringing dissimilar stakeholders together in a meaningful way which resulted in concrete results.

The founding of the Cátedra de Estudios sobre Discapacidad is the focal point in the unprecedented joint venture of the Woodcock-Muñoz Foundation with the Cuban Center of Disability Studies and the University of Havana. The existence of the Cátedra and its motivated creators and staff ultimately led to the establishment of the WMF Cuba Outreach Project.

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### **Other Sources:**

The University of Havana, Department of Psychology, <http://www.psico.uh.cu/>

The **Woodcock-Muñoz Foundation** (WMF) is a private, non-profit operating foundation that supports the advancement of contemporary cognitive assessment.

For more information, please visit the WMF website at: <http://www.woodcock-munoz-foundation.org>

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