My research interests center upon the role played by international factors in the consolidation of the post-revolutionary Mexican state. I believe that events outside of Mexico played a significant part in facilitating the development – and the survival – of the stable political system that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) dominated for decades. Upon the completion of my current project, which focuses on the impact of World War II on Mexican politics, I intend to undertake a study assessing the extent to which the geopolitical realities of the Cold War contributed to the ability of the PRI regime to marginalize, silence, and repress its critics during the years after 1945. Specifically, I plan to examine the government’s use of Article 145 of the Federal Penal Code against opposition figures that it deemed threats to public order. This clause in the criminal code, which outlawed acts of “social dissolution,” is especially interesting because it was introduced during the Second World War ostensibly to protect the country from spies and saboteurs acting as agents of the Axis. President Manuel Avila Camacho secured legislative approval of the article in October 1941 by pointing to the debilitating effects of subversive propaganda in European countries that had subsequently fallen to the Wehrmacht and by warning that the totalitarian powers might launch a similarly destabilizing campaign in Mexico. During the postwar period, however, the provision was used against a different kind of alleged foreign threat: supposedly communist-inspired activists and agitators. Thus, the Mexican government took advantage of one set of international conditions to enact legislation that greatly expanded its ability to move against its opponents, and as the international situation evolved, the regime adapted, using its laws against “social dissolution” to confront a new “external” threat. In practice, Article 145 served as a useful way for PRI administrations to intimidate and punish those who objected to their increasingly conservative, authoritarian tendencies. Among those accused of and jailed for “spreading ideas, programs, or norms of action of foreign governments that disrupt public order or affect the sovereignty of the Mexican state” were prominent leftist artists and intellectuals, activists who cited evidence of electoral fraud, and union leaders who sought to maintain their independence from the regime. When students mobilized in 1968 to call for reform, the repeal of Article 145 was among their principal demands. Although the administration of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz used violence to repress the student movement that year, it did remove the clause from the books in 1970 in an effort to bring a generation that was becoming estranged from the ruling party back into the fold of the PRI regime. While legislation proscribing acts of “social dissolution” thus disappeared, the origins of Article 145 and its use during the 29 years that it was in force reveal much about the connections between international conditions and the endurance of single-party rule in Mexico.

Another project that I hope to carry out is the preparation of a biographical sketch of Francisco Castillo Nájera, who served as Mexico’s ambassador to the United States under both Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Avila Camacho. Though he is now largely forgotten, Castillo Nájera achieved prominence in Mexico first as a doctor in the army’s medical service, later as a diplomat and as a confidant to Cárdenas and Avila Camacho, and finally as foreign minister. In the course of the field research that I carried out for my dissertation, I discovered that Castillo Nájera’s personal papers have only recently become available to researchers at the archive of the Mexican foreign ministry. Not only does this important collection of documents shed light on Mexican efforts to capitalize on the opportunities provided by World War II to improve its relations with Washington, it also shows how significant Castillo Nájera was as a political operative within Mexico and as an intermediary between the two presidents for whom he worked. I believe that a careful analysis of these practically unexamined documents will shed new light on US-Mexican relations and on the workings of Mexican politics in the mid-twentieth century.