

**Sample Student Evaluations for José Vergara**  
**Russian 237: Russian Prison Narratives**  
**Bryn Mawr College**  
**Fall 2021**

“José is very accommodating, receptive to any and all interpretations (but will pressure/complicate what you say to broaden your analysis!), and eager to publish your work (which makes one’s writing feel both valuable and interesting) and not simply let your work ‘die on his desk.’ He is also quick to adjust discussions based on class needs and takes feedback very seriously, so any concerns or issues with the class are resolved/student needs. He also responds in a speedy manner (which I appreciate because some professors take quite long to respond to emails) and is always willing to meet with students for help.”

“I would absolutely recommend the course to another student who is also similarly interested in this material/literature. I also am so grateful to have had the opportunity to take a class with and get to know Professor Vergara! I feel like that has been really meaningful for my personal and academic development, as well as for working out and trying to articulate and negotiate my intellectual and academic investments. But I’ve felt really liberated, both academically and personally, in this course, to explore what intrigues me, and it’s been a really fulfilling experience.”

“I felt that discussions were well-maintained and that the assignments were very clear. I can’t think of anything that could improve instruction or content.”

“He allows students to lead the discussions and gives space to really engage with texts and share ideas. He also clearly has a very deep understanding of the texts. I appreciate that he takes students ideas very seriously and sees them to be equal to his. It creates a really fun classroom. I don’t have any critiques.”

“very accommodating and willing to move deadlines if needed, understanding of other commitments that make it hard to complete the readings as in depth as others.”

“Professor Vergara makes sure to connect with students and communicates in order to create a comfortable and safe environment. I feel as if I’m able to vocalize my ideas in class without judgment, and often for him or classmates to build off of and return feedback on. Professor Vergara also makes sure to never cold call, which I deeply appreciate — if I am called on, it’s

in response to eye contact or other cues that let him know I have something to add to the discussion, as opposed to forcing people to participate in class.”

“I think one strength I see is that Professor Vergara is really interested in and exciting about what he is teaching, which always helps to create a great classroom environment when the professor is excited about the material. I could also tell that he was interested in letting students guide the discussion to areas/topics/ideas that were of interest to us in the readings, and I really appreciated that aspect of the course. The emphasis on discussion was great, and I feel that he was always very supportive of my ideas, whether I expressed them in class, on the Google doc, in office hours, or in my essays. I also feel that another major strength of Professor Vergara was the ways in which he gave extremely helpful feedback/comments on the drafts of our essays (often in really short turnaround times!), which were then extremely useful for our revisions. Similarly, he was always very helpful and gave really thoughtful and useful ideas whenever I discussed my plans/ideas for the Scalar writing assignments with him. I really feel that through taking this class with Professor Vergara and being able to engage with him on these subjects and with my writing, I’ve been pushed (in a good way!) to think more carefully, write more intentionally, research more creatively, and have really improved as a writer, thinker, and student because of this class. I totally understand and respect Professor Vergara’s stance about not grading students in a way that takes away from or prevents students from thinking about what matters to us and what type of work is important to us, and I appreciate that emphasis. I definitely feel like that emphasis has inspired me to think more about what matters to me and what type of work I want to do and what type of work matters to me. I also think that the principles behind not engaging in grading in this way are excellent, and I really appreciate the fact that Professor Vergara has clearly put in a lot of thought into what he values in the classroom and one thing that he values is encouraging students to think for ourselves about what matters to us, how we engage in the work, without having any type of adversarial dynamic or relation in which there is a hierarchical assignment of grades. Additionally, I think that not having to worry about the grade I’m going to receive definitely helped me to feel liberated in my intellectual exploration and free to explore different topics and writing styles; similarly, I feel that all of the work (especially the essays) were extremely gratifying, and I honestly think that I spent more time on them in

light of the fact that they are self-graded than I would have spent on them if they were just graded as normal papers.”

“The care Professor Vergara has for us and what we have to say in this course really comes through.

He is always quick to respond to emails, open to meeting with students, and very helpful and accommodating. The course feels well-structured as far as literature classes go, and he is very knowledgeable about the topics.”

“The instructor is very knowledgeable about the course material, and I appreciated background information on each of the authors we discussed.”

“I appreciated the Mid-Semester Evaluation that José sent out, which I believe helped create an accessible and inclusive course experience. Students could voice their concerns (ex. what is working in class as well as what is not) and José would address and meet these needs immediately.”

“Discussions were both accessible and inclusive. I cannot think of any areas in which attention to accessibility and inclusivity could be improved.”

“many times to be able to communicate what we did and didn’t like about the course throughout the semester anonymously.”

“Professor Vergara is very understanding with meeting students’ needs— it’s obvious he cares about our experience overall, as well as our general health, and often allows for leniency to not only ease anxiety but create a better sense of self-responsibility.”

“He built in a one-week extension in the syllabus and that was really helpful and accommodating! He also really valued our contributions in class and discussion and on the Google doc, and I appreciated that he was engaged with what we were saying/thinking, and thought it was valuable and meaningful, which is really important for me to feel like my professors care about what we are saying and thinking. That was really valuable, and, at least for me, contributed to feeling like my contributions in class and on the Google doc were welcome and appreciated. I also think the self-grading aspect of the course definitely helped the workload to be more manageable, because it meant that we could choose what felt meaningful and important and valuable and necessary to us, etc.”

“Professor Vergara was always willing to listen to what every student had to say and encouraged everyone to engage in discussion. He was flexible with deadlines and encouraged students to

meet with him to discuss material they didn't understand or brainstorm for papers. In this way, I felt like the course encouraged an individualized and inclusive experience. I think that Professor Vergara's grading methods (or lack thereof) are intended to make the course more inclusive and individualized."

"Overall the course was accessible and inclusive in terms of level of material. The class discussions themselves were set up in a way to facilitate an inclusive discussion that allowed anyone to discuss what they would like to. The discussion boards themselves were also really helpful in terms of these discussions, and I really enjoyed reading my classmates' posts."

"Yes! If you are interested in Russian literature and/or prison writing, this is a great class to learn more about Russian culture and society as well as the prison system (and how we can critique it).

"I would, as this class was very enjoyable and thought-provoking and I enjoyed Professor Vergara's teaching style."

"Yes I think it was very engaging and I learned so much."

"Most definitely! If they're willing to accept the reading load, I think it's a great course to take. The material we read was very engaging and all of our discussions were very productive. I often leave the class feeling as if I've learned quite a bit, and not just about the material itself."

"I would!! I learned so much, read some really amazing material, and grew as a student. I would absolutely recommend Professor Vergara as a caring, engaged, and structured professor. If someone is willing to put in the work, then I'd say this is a great class."

"I really enjoyed taking this class and I'm glad I took a chance on it. I think it's such an important thing to learn about, and I haven't discussed Russian history, specifically Russian prison history, in such detail anywhere else."

"very accommodating, willing to adapt to responses from the class"

"I would absolutely love to take another course with Professor Vergara again in the future! He's been an amazing professor, and I feel so inspired by him and his course. I feel that I grew so much as a writer, thinker, and as a student through this class and through his guidance and presence, and I really appreciate that. I also really appreciate how kind he was and willing to meet and discuss ideas and essays and revisions and even just to chat, too! That was and is really meaningful for me."

“Professor Vergara is great! Thank you for an awesome semester.”

“I definitely believe that the most productive and engaging parts of the class would have to be the discussions held in class. I found the group to be a very welcoming environment that allowed for me to share my opinions and ideas freely, often receiving positive feedback and other classmates building off of what I had said previous.”

“I really liked the discussion boards that were posted each week because I could see what my classmates were most interested in. I also liked that we had to reply to these discussions because that facilitated conversations and I had to think deeply about what my peers posted and how I could reply to it.”

“The Scalar writing assignments, for sure, especially with the revision. That was so helpful for me as a student/writer/thinker, and I really enjoyed the experience of working on them and thinking about them and writing them and revising them in light of feedback. I also really loved the readings we did throughout this course; they were really interesting and I’m so glad to have had the opportunity to read them and engage with them and discuss them with Prof. Vergara and my fellow classmates and peers.”

“I found the writing assignments more engaging for my learning because I was able to apply the things that we discussed in class and develop my ideas in more detail.”

“I thought the Google Docs was a productive way to write, read, and respond to initial responses to the assigned texts. I also thought small group discussions were helpful for testing out ideas and getting feedback/asking questions/etc. I liked the more interactive activities we did in class (ex. writing on the chalk board and getting to see people's responses to other people's ideas in real time).”

“I like the fact that we get to draft and revisit our papers after receiving peer/instructor feedback. It makes the writing process more realistic and you get to really take your time with your ideas and let them develop and breathe a little.”

“Definitely the discussions, which often were what encouraged me to do the readings fully and take more intensive notes so that I could participate better. The discussions truly made it worth it, as well as the support shown from classmates and Professor Vergara.”

“listening to the ideas of other people, working in smaller groups was very effective for me to be able to get my point across without thinking that the time had passed in class to share my thoughts.”

“The discussion boards and the student-led in-class discussions were really helpful.”

“I feel that I really benefitted and learned a lot from my experience of the Scalar pieces, and revising them. I always enjoy having the opportunity to go in depth into texts/ideas I enjoyed via writing about them, and for me, the experience I had writing my Scalar pieces was deeply productive, engaging, fascinating, and exciting! I also feel that I benefitted and grew enormously from having the built-in opportunity to revise in light of helpful comments/feedback from Prof. Vergara and a peer; I usually don't engage in revising and restructuring my essays in this much depth after I've written them, but I could really see how my writing and thinking improved as a result of that.”

“I think that the discussions contributed the most to my learning in this course because I was able to hear other perspectives and gained a fuller understanding of the texts.”

“I really like the set-up of the course- reading and then having the class discussion. I like the homework assignments too, since writing a concise paragraph forces me to get my thought in order before class.”

“I find that I really enjoy having the opportunity to write a discussion question in the shared Google Doc once per week, as it helps me to articulate an aspect of the text that I found intriguing or worth pursuing in discussion. I also often enjoy breaking into smaller groups/pairs during class discussion to better articulate my own ideas and develop our thoughts.”

“I've really enjoyed our discussion sections; I've gained so much insight from talking about the readings with the class. I also think your feedback on the essays has been really helpful to my understanding of the readings on a greater level.”

“I like the interactive aspects of the course - e.g. writing on the chalkboards - because we get to respond to others' ideas, rather than just discussing what was interesting to me as an individual.”

“I also always really enjoy the in-class writing exercises we do! They're fun, and keep me on my toes, especially when there is a word/sentence limit.”

“I had \*so much\* fun reading my peer’s paper and giving them feedback, and I thought that was really meaningful as an activity.”

“I feel the discussion component has been very productive. I have always felt free and safe to discuss my opinions and have learned.”

“I really appreciated the thoughtful and thorough comments on my Scalar contribution, and they offered really meaningful suggestions for places for improvement, as well as demonstrated what I perceived to be a really thoughtful attention to detail when reading my work and careful consideration of it. For me, the means of providing feedback is excellent -- getting a document back with margin comments, the rubric, and extended comments at the end works really well, so I’m extremely happy and content with that, and grateful for the amount of detail and careful reading that goes into providing it for us.”

“I appreciate your openness in being willing to meet to discuss the feedback verbally in addition to providing it on paper/in document!”

“I appreciate all the thorough comments you’ve given on our writing assignments, and I appreciate you taking our ideas seriously enough to really engage and provide meaningful feedback. It has improved my understanding of the reading material and my ability to engage with it.”

“One ‘aha’ moment that comes to mind is when I learned in class the metaphorical presence of the garden of Eden, snake, etc., imagery in “Lady Macbeth.” That was really interesting for me, and added a lot of depth to my understanding of the story. Another ‘aha’ moment came in our discussion of Tolstoy’s “After the Ball,” when we talked about how the transition between the two sections of the story was like he entered a ball all over again, and how that parallel works to help him (and us as readers) understand the union of the state with brutality, and how the public veneer of beauty/elegance/grace/balls depends on the underbelly of state-sanctioned violence which is subjugated and attempted to be removed from public consciousness/“light.””

“I’d just like to say that I really appreciate how kind and accessible you’ve made yourself, especially with office hours and being willing to meet to discuss the first Scalar writing assignment, and with giving such helpful comments/feedback on the polished draft, and with being so responsive to emails. I really appreciate it.”

“I always looked forward to the readings, and I’ve discovered some new all-time favorite readings (Avvakum and ‘After the Ball’ in particular) through the course.”

“I really appreciate how much time and effort you've put into the class. I've felt like many of the literature-focused classes I've taken here have felt unstructured and the professors haven't engaged much with the class, but your attention and care really show, and I appreciate it. Thank you for taking the time to give feedback and engage with what we have to say!”