Elaine Penagos enjoyed a remarkable first year as a grad student in the department of religious studies. She entered the program in 2015 as a Wallace B. Cliff Award recipient in honor of the emeritus professor given to an outstanding religious studies MA student. Throughout the year, she proved repeatedly that the award was well-deserved.

In May, Penagos was invited to present her paper “The Afro-Cuban Response to the Restrictions of Being Mary: The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy, Ochún and Our Lady of Charity” at the IRISE Graduate Paper Competition, and received a $500 award to support her professional development. Later that month, she was selected to speak at the release party for the summer 2016 issue of the DU journal As/Us, a special issue dedicated to women of color and gender non-conforming people of color in higher education.

Most recently, Penagos was awarded a $1,000 AHSS Student Research Grant for her research project "The Cult of San Lazaro & Babalú Ayé – Faith and Healing in Cuban Culture in Miami,” which focuses on San Lazaro’s status as a healer among Cubans and other Latinx (gender-neutral alternative to Latino/a) living in South Florida. Last summer, she traveled to Miami to conduct ethnographic research for this study.

“Miami’s positionality is unique in that it is often thought of as an extension of Latin America and the Caribbean rather than a major metropolis within the United States,” said Penagos. “Within Latinx expressions of religious devotion, we find places of intersectionality like Miami where the hybridity of identities becomes difficult to overlook. Devotion to folk saints like San Lazaro exemplifies this hybridity since he is a complex figure who embodies attributes of the resurrected Lazarus of Bethany, the poor man Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke and the Orisha Babalú Ayé.”

In addition to the ethnographic component of this project, Penagos also conducted research at the University of Miami’s Cuban Heritage Collection, to flesh out the historical context of the cult of San Lazaro in both Miami and Cuba.

“My research has shown me how important it is for diaspora and exile Latinx communities to recreate the sacred corporealness of worship spaces as both an expression of religious devotion and a way of demonstrating to others the role that the sacred plays in their world,” said Penagos. “Looking at the example of Rincon de San Lazaro in Miami, it is clear that one of the greatest feats accomplished by the construction of this church was the creation of a space that simultaneously serves as a bridge to the homeland (church in Cuba) and a point of intersection between Afro-Cuban religions and Catholicism.”

Penagos worked with many religious studies faculty during her first year, including Professor Luís León.
“Elaine’s work on female subjectivity, feminism, and deities in Santeria myth and rituals is a powerful contribution to the literature on Afro-Cuban religions—from a place where most practitioners are Mexican and Mexican American!” said León. “She is a committed and tenacious student and researcher whose engagement with her subjects is a boon for religious studies.”

Penagos will write up her research findings during the 2016-17 academic year as part of her MA completion project within the Lived Religions specialization. After graduation, she plans to pursue her PhD, with the ultimate goal of becoming a professor in religious studies. With all of this keeping her busy, Penagos still has a piece of advice to share with fellow graduate students:

“The most important takeaway from my first year in graduate school is to apply for EVERYTHING! You never know the opportunities that you might get and the people you might meet by sharing and showcasing your research,” she said.