Tania Valdez is an inspiration. While an undergraduate, she found her passion and her future in seeking social justice.

Valdez believes that, while her academic performance greatly contributed to her development, other aspects of her college experience also were crucial. “One life-changing experience has been mentoring 56 first-year undergraduate students over the past 2½ years,” she explains. “Through building relationships with these students, I found my voice and began to recognize that education greatly enhances one’s ability to positively influence the lives of others.”

Another experience that was central to Valdez’s leadership development was the Alternative Spring Break trip she helped plan and organize. A delegation of 10 students and two faculty members traveled to Juarez, Mexico, to learn about the femicide of more than 500 young women living and working in factories on the Mexican border. Valdez assisted a Mexican women’s organization that supports families of femicide victims.

The list of Valdez’s activities is extraordinary. Among them, she was a founding member of INCITE! Women of Color against Violence; a volunteer for Crossroads Safehouse, Hope Lives! Breast Cancer Support Center, and the Core Center; and an active member of the Key Service Community and University Honors Program. She also tutored Spanish students, played violin in Colorado State’s symphony orchestra, and worked two campus jobs.

While engaged in all these activities, Valdez maintained a stellar 3.94 grade-point average. In May, she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in sociology, a minor in Spanish, and interdisciplinary studies certificates in Chicana/o Studies and Women’s Studies. She is one of 240 applicants from a pool of 7,000 who was accepted to law school at the University of California at Berkeley. “Having a legal background will help me connect people to resources previously inaccessible, and therefore, I will be able to effectively advocate for and empower others,” Valdez says.

Valdez’s leadership, academic achievement, community service, and commitment to excellence were recognized this year by the Alumni Association with the Albert C. Yates Student Leadership Award.

As she ponders her just-completed undergraduate education, Valdez reflects on the opportunities that higher education creates, “not only for careers, but also for learning about who we are as people and solidifying how we want to move in the world. I have changed radically in the past 4½ years – not only because of the material I have learned in classes, but also because of the projects, service, and other campus and community activities.”

Valdez’s passion and energy undoubtedly will effect social change, and by her graceful example, she will give hope to others.

Johanna Hamburger is a tireless advocate for the protection of our environment. She also is an outstanding example of how liberal arts students and faculty are actively engaged in interdisciplinary efforts to find solutions to global challenges.

Hamburger will graduate in 2009 with a double major in political science and economics with certificates in biological diversity and environmental studies. While maintaining a 4.0 grade-point average in her array of studies, Hamburger conducted research in Colorado State’s Restoration Ecology lab to find a shrub species that can tolerate high zinc concentrations for use in the restoration of mining sites. She worked as an intern with the Forest Guardians to list the black-tailed prairie dog under the Endangered Species Act, as an intern at the Environmental Law Institute in Washington, D.C., and as a research assistant at Colorado State investigating global carbon cap-and-trade schemes.

Her extraordinary environmental achievements were recognized by receipt of the Morris K. Udall Scholarship, which is awarded nationally to future environmental leaders. She is one of two Udall Scholars in the history of Colorado State and the first from the College of Liberal Arts.

Hamburger also is an active member of the campus and Fort Collins communities. She is founder and team captain of the Colorado State Mock Trial Team, co-editor of the University Honors Program literary magazine, an intern for the Larimer County Public Defender’s Office, a tutor for HomeRun, and a volunteer for the Sierra Club. After graduation, she plans to pursue dual master’s and law degrees in environmental studies, followed by a career in environmental law.