Compitello Stepping Down After 23 Years Leading Department of Spanish and Portuguese

College of Humanities
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As a professor at Michigan State University, Malcolm Compitello was part of a very good program in Spanish.

But what he saw at the University of Arizona was a setting and a community where Spanish was everywhere. The UA had a learning environment for the language that was second to none, which made all the difference for Compitello, who arrived on campus in 1995 as the new head of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese [1].

"When I looked around here, you didn't have to go far to learn Spanish. It's all around," Compitello says, recalling the factors that brought him to Tucson. "There's a higher percentage of students who come into the University having studied Spanish and there is a higher percentage of students who know Spanish because of their family background. The recruiting base and the ability to connect with the community is much greater here."

At the end of this semester, after 23 years leading the department, Compitello will step down from his administrative role and return to teaching full time.

As the longest currently serving department head at the UA, Compitello has been a fixture as an administrator. Along the way, he also has been a scholar, professor and mentor.

"Sometimes we forget as educators how much it meant to us when somebody said we were good at something," Compitello says. "If you can make those connections, they're lifelong transformations for the students, who all of a sudden know there's somebody out there who believes in them. That's what education is all about. It's about transforming students and making them better."

College of Humanities Dean Alain-Philippe Durand noted Compitello's exemplary service and leadership over more than two decades and said he's grateful for Compitello's tireless promotion of the College of Humanities on and off campus, with students, administrators, alumni and donors.

"The UA's Department of Spanish and Portuguese is second to none, graduating students who have not only the language and cultural talent necessary to succeed globally, but outstanding communication and critical thinking skills that further set them apart," Durand says. "The college and the University thank Malcolm for his outstanding dedication and passion to helping students and making their lives better."
In 2015, Compitello received the prestigious Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Award for Distinguished Service to the Profession, becoming only the 20th professor to receive the honor.

"He has expanded and reshaped the traditional language and literature curriculum toward a new multidisciplinary cultural definition, exemplifying innovation in his own research," the association proclaimed. "He is among the legendary mentors of the profession, nurturing his own students with extraordinary acumen and contributing to the professionalization of students and junior faculty members on and beyond his own campus."

From Sputnik to Spanish

Growing up on Long Island in the 1950s, Compitello found himself enrolled in a Spanish class.

The Soviet launch of Sputnik had spurred the U.S. government to begin heavily investing in science, technology and international studies like language education. At the top of the list for school administrators was Russian, followed by German and French. Students who ranked lower academically were placed in Spanish classes.

"I would never have been a Spanish major if not for that serendipity," Compitello says. "Curiously, although the assumption was my prognosis for educational excellence wasn't as great as some of my classmates' in the eyes of the teachers doing the analysis, the kicker was the best language teacher in the school was in Spanish."

During the first week of junior high, Compitello was surprised to find himself suddenly a top student.

"This was the only class I'd ever taken where I knew the answers before everybody else and I was willing to provide them and the instructor was willing to call on me first," he says. "All of a sudden, I was thrust into a situation with something I was really good at."

Finding His Passion

In high school and at St. John's University, Compitello ran track. Though he was dedicated and skilled, Compitello knew others were better.

"At the time, the thing I wanted to do most was to win an Olympic medal in track and field. I looked at myself and thought I'd never be able to win an Olympic medal. So, I asked (myself), 'What do you want to do second most?' And that was major in Spanish," he says.

So Compitello majored in Spanish at St. John's, graduating in 1968. He went on to earn a master's degree from St. John's in Hispanic literature and later a doctorate in Hispanic literature from Indiana University.

As a young professor, he decided his success should be based on his own focus on the students and their individual improvement.
"Nobody's skills in a second language are perfect at any given time," Compitello says. "You have to invest in students and spend time to work with them and encourage them and help move the students forward. Above all, try to connect and make sure everybody in class is better at the end than they were at the beginning."

**Rebuilding**

Compitello was chosen to lead the Department of Spanish and Portuguese in a new direction, at a time when the UA was working to differentiate itself as a student-centered research university, with a greater emphasis on teaching than its peers had.

"In whatever we would do, we would put the needs of students first," Compitello says. "We would never back away from the importance of providing a quality education that equips them with the skills they need to succeed. We embraced that 23 years ago and we placed our focus on making the students better. We worked to recruit students and retain students and we hired faculty who could deliver on that."

In rebuilding the department, Compitello analyzed where the profession was trending and where that aligned with the strategic plan of the University. What emerged was a plan that called for: moving away from a literature-based curriculum to expand to cultural studies as well; emphasizing the critical thinking and writing skills that would connect students' learning to the real world; strengthening the large Spanish heritage program and building stronger connections to the community; strengthening the programs in linguistics, translation and interpretation, and Spanish for professionals; and bringing in practically oriented aspects like service learning and internships that identified career options for students.

In revamping the curriculum, Compitello tripled the number of Spanish majors, with enrollment consistently placing the UA among the top two universities in the country. Portuguese enrollment at the UA is fifth highest in the United States.

"What we've done, for both graduate students and undergraduates, is have a clear path from the beginning with options inside and outside the profession," Compitello says. "We need to be totally connected to the University's engagement mission."

**Studying Abroad**

When Compitello arrived at the UA, the Spanish program had only one study abroad option for students.

From his own experiences as a graduate student in Spain, when he spent a year in the early 1970s as a visiting instructor of English at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Compitello knew the incredible impact that studying abroad could have on students.

"That completely changed my vision on everything," he says. "I was the biggest social, cultural and intellectual sponge I could be and just absorbed everything."

So Compitello worked to place study abroad at the center of the department's mission.
"When I came here, I said, 'Study abroad will be a priority,'" he says. "We've always thought that sending students abroad is something that is acutely important. I believe that study abroad, as it was for me, is a transformational experience."

Through fundraising for scholarships and leveraging connections abroad, Compitello was able to expand the department's study abroad programs to include multiple sites in Spain, as well as Chile, Costa Rica and Brazil.

"We're always looking for ways to promote and to foment student interest and at the same time make the programs as accessible as possible. The generosity of our donors has been wonderful," Compitello says.

Compitello will continue as director of the Humanities Seminars Program, an adult education series at the UA, which has grown under his leadership to offer more than 25 courses a year to more than 2,000 students.

"Malcolm combines powerful strategic vision with the ability to bring those visions to reality. He brings the same dedication and care to Humanities Seminars students as he does to graduate and undergraduate students," says Janet Hollander, chair of the program's board. "He recognizes the passion in these lifelong learners and works tirelessly to bring about stimulating opportunities. His accomplishments on behalf of students of all ages are truly exceptional."

The Future

In Compitello's 23 years as department head, the department has educated 7,624 students with a minor in Spanish or Portuguese and awarded 1,980 bachelor's degrees, 197 master's degrees and 135 doctoral degrees.

"We take pride in the wonderful accomplishments of all of those who completed undergraduate and graduate degrees in Spanish and Portuguese, and the varied and fascinating career paths inside and out of academia that they have charted," he says.

In honor of his years of service, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese is establishing the Malcolm Alan Compitello Scholarship Endowment for Study Abroad to support a new generation of students as they learn through cultural immersion.

In his years at Michigan State and the UA, Compitello personally directed 40 doctoral dissertations, served on 65 dissertation committees and directed 10 master's and undergraduate honors theses, helping to start the careers of numerous professors of Spanish across the country. The program's growth ? both in terms of students and an expanded curriculum ? is an important testament to Compitello's leadership, professors say.

Spanish professor Robert Fiore, who was a colleague of Compitello's at Michigan State as well as the UA, says Compitello's versatility as a leader has had a strong impact on students over the years.
"I have the greatest respect for his intelligence, commitment and perseverance as a teacher, scholar, mentor and administrator. As a person, he is principled, considerate and sensitive. As an administrator, he is committed, thorough and prescient," Fiore says. "Students on all levels consider him to be a truly inspirational teacher and scholar as well as an ideal mentor."

Compitello says he's stepping down at a time when a strong faculty in Spanish and Portuguese has the department well-positioned to continue advancing the interests of students as well as the University's mission.

"We've always been a bottom-up organization. What I've always told the faculty is, 'What we've built, we've built together.' Our job is to assure that we've built on our success and are always vigilant about what it is we need to do to stay ahead of the curve," Compitello says. "We've built something special here and I'm confident it's going to continue."

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