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OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Querencia at UNM

THE PROVOST'S PERSPECTIVE FROM THE HEART OF UNM

Focusing on the humanities and our sense of place

This month, The University of New Mexico celebrated the groundbreaking of the Humanities and Social Sciences building, an investment many years in the making. As we look toward the learning and discovery that will take place there, I find myself reflecting on the importance of the humanities in our lives — and especially on language, which has shaped my personal and professional journey.



Ground is broken on the site of the future Humanities and Social Sciences building on Oct. 22.

Through the humanities and social sciences, we gain tools to weigh evidence, understand different perspectives, and consider the human consequences of our decisions. In New Mexico, these fields also help us study and sustain the languages, histories, and cultural traditions that hold generations of knowledge, connect us to our communities, and shape our identities and sense of belonging.

Language is central to that work. We use it to ask questions, share knowledge, express care, and make ourselves understood. It carries our stories across generations and connects us to people and places, even when we are far from home. A familiar expression or the sound of a loved one's voice can bring us back to a kitchen table, a childhood conversation, or a community that helped shape who we are.

I carry a deep appreciation for the connections among language, family, culture, and place. Those connections also helped shape the questions I pursued as a scholar in speech-language pathology.

My research has focused on young children learning Spanish and English, including how to distinguish typical bilingual development from language difficulties. Making that distinction accurately requires understanding a child's experiences with both languages. We must consider what children know and how they communicate across the settings and relationships in their lives.

For me, this work has always carried a profound responsibility: to recognize children's abilities, respect the languages of their families, and identify their needs accurately. We want children who need support to receive it, while ensuring that the process of learning two languages is understood and valued.

That responsibility has shaped how I think about education more broadly. Understanding someone requires curiosity about the experiences they bring. It asks us to listen carefully, examine our assumptions, and recognize strengths that may be unfamiliar to us. These principles are essential to scholarship, teaching, and the relationships that sustain a university.

In this issue, we spotlight two members of our campus community whose work reflects the significance of language: Molly Arévalo, associate director at the Language Learning Center, and Heather Sweetser, principal lecturer of Arabic. Together, their stories invite us to consider what becomes possible when we learn another language and encounter the world through another perspective.

As our new Humanities and Social Sciences building takes shape, I hope we will also reflect on the human connections it will support. The study of language, history, and culture helps us understand where we come from, how we relate to one another, and what we hope to carry forward. It deepens our sense of belonging and our appreciation for the place we share.

With much appreciation,

Barbara Rodríguez
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs



When it comes to promoting the importance of languages, Molly Arévalo is among the most passionate advocates at UNM.

The associate director at the Language Learning Center (LLC) is frequently found at tabling events around campus promoting the benefits of learning languages. And those benefits are many, from exploring new careers, studying abroad, improving communication skills in multilingual environments, to developing understanding and empathy of people both from your culture and in new cultures.

"It's impossible to learn a language without learning about a culture," she said. "Learning another language makes you more open-minded and gives you a deeper understanding of others."

Arévalo herself is bilingual in English and Spanish, and has a high intermediate competency in French. Additionally, she is a language student herself, currently taking American Sign Language classes.

Arévalo is originally from Rockford, Ill., and lived in Los Angeles for 20 years before moving to New Mexico five years ago to join the LLC.

In her role, she works with director Emma Trentman at the LLC, which supports all aspects of language learning at UNM, including resources, space for language classes, as well as social and language-learning groups. At any given time at the LLC, one might find a group practicing calligraphy on one side of the center, with another group learning American Sign Language, and a small group studying for a French exam.

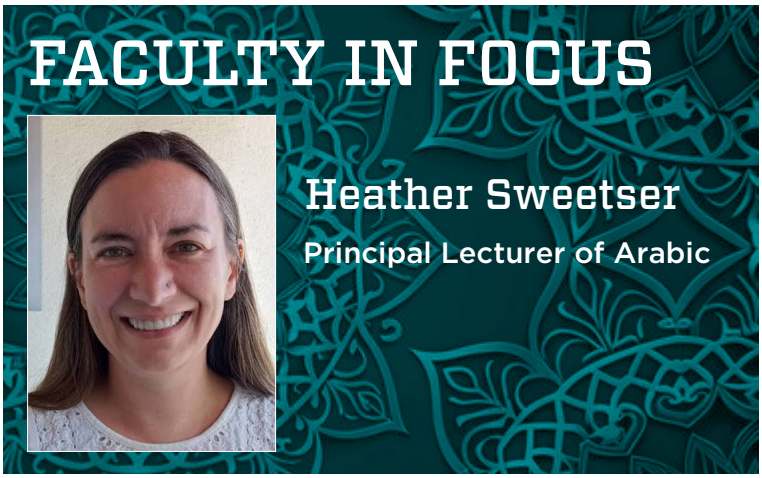
Arévalo said that although a large percentage of students have Hispanic heritage at UNM, many may not be aware that UNM offers 17 different languages through programs housed in three departments: Languages, Cultures and Literatures; Spanish and Portuguese; and Linguistics. Languages offered include Chinese, Hebrew, Japanese, Nahuatl and Yucatec Maya, and American Sign Language.

And she points out that while students — especially from Northern New Mexico — may come in with some familiarity of Spanish, they often are not fluent and become curious to explore the language and cultural ties while at UNM, she said. That motivates many students to study Spanish. That was the case with Arévalo, whose grandparents were from Northern New Mexico, which motivated her wanting to become bilingual.

“Many students are interested in becoming fluent in Spanish because they don’t feel confident to speak with those who are,” she said. “It’s a way to connect them to their family culture and deepen connection and understanding.”

Based now in Ortega Hall, the LLC will be strategically placed on the first floor of the new Humanities and Social Sciences Building that is under construction, and the new building will have more space for events.

“We only hope to grow with time as we gain greater awareness of what the LLC and learning languages has to offer,” Arévalo said.



Minnesota native Heather Sweetser — a principal lecturer of Arabic in the Department of Languages, Cultures, and Literatures — never could have imagined that one day she would be fluent in what was a completely unfamiliar language — Arabic.

As a member of the Army in the late 1990s, she was tasked with learning Arabic at the Defense Language Institute, eventually becoming an Arabic interpreter. For this Midwesterner who spoke no other language than English, this was the ultimate challenge, as well as a great example of how language is intertwined with learning about other worldviews and cultures.

“Before I joined the Army, I thought the Middle East was in South America,” she admitted.

It turned out that learning a new language also meant learning an entirely new way not only of learning about the world, but of looking at the world and its people.

Sweetser says learning Arabic helped her to realize that language is more than just learning a new alphabet, words, and dialects. Language is steeped in the cultural identity of a people and how they see and interact with the world, she said. “There is no way to learn a language without learning the culture as well.”

For Sweetser, she said learning Arabic did not come naturally, requiring many hours of hard work and practice. “Anybody can learn anything if they have two of three ingredients: Time, desire and talent. I did not have the talent, but I had the desire and put in the time.”

In 2012, she earned a master's in Arabic at Ohio State. She joined UNM in 2014.

Sweetser, who was the recipient of the 2022 Language Teacher of the Year from the American Council on Teachers of Foreign Languages, is one of the co-creators of wecanlearnarabic.com, a resource designed for both beginner and intermediate learners of the language.

For her, it's not a matter of what Arabic has taught her, but instead "What hasn't Arabic taught me?" She credits her journey of language fluency as giving her an appreciation for how different cultures consider gender, how they relate to each other, and how they tackle challenges through different ways of knowing.

Although languages such as Arabic may seem intimidating, Sweetser invites anyone with an interest to explore her classes, which she structures as fun and not focused on perfection (assignments and exams are pass/fail). "Fluency is not the goal for any one class," she said.

Since learning a language is intertwined with acquiring appreciation of a different culture, each person who begins learning a language will grow in unexpected ways, she said.

"We're not just teaching you 'hello,' " she said. "We're teaching you how to start a conversation."



The humanities will be among many disciplines featured during Research & Discovery Week, organized by the Office of the Vice President for Research, which will be held Nov. 2-6 at the Student Union Building and various locations around campus. The week is dedicated to all areas and people related to research — faculty, undergraduates, graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and staff — in areas spanning from art to quantum.

Here are just a couple of events during R&D week of note:

- The Festival of Languages, an event that celebrates the power of languages in culture, community, and careers, will be held noon-5 p.m. Nov. 6 in the Language Learning Center in Ortega Hall. Additional information can be found here.
- Can you present your work in three minutes or less in a way that both informs and engages a general audience? That is the challenge for participants of the annual LoboBITES competition, which will be 3-5 p.m. Nov. 5 in the Student Union Building Ballroom C.

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And there is still time for this opportunity for faculty interested in leadership. The Office of the Vice President for Research and the Office of Academic Affairs invite tenured UNM faculty who seek to transform their leadership effectiveness to submit applications for the 2027 WeR1 Leadership Innovation for Faculty Transformation (LIFT) program. LIFT provides concrete support and mentoring over the calendar year to a small cohort of faculty to advance their research and/or administrative leadership knowledge and skills. This opportunity is open to Albuquerque faculty in units that report to the provost. Please see link for additional information about the program, as well as application instructions. Applications are due Oct. 28.

Querencia at UNM is a monthly publication of the Office of Academic Affairs. Ideas for future content? Email us at querencia1@unm.edu. Find previous issues at provost.unm.edu.