



Some Night Thoughts on the Termination of Italian Language Programs

Anthony Julian Tamburri (October 09, 2010)



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It surely seems that the termination and/or reduction of Italian studies programs is becoming a habitual thing. Even if not, what can we do about it?

At the end of last month a number of us were informed about the cancellation of numerous programs at the University at Albany, SUNY. One of these programs is its Italian Studies program.

In my sending out the email below this past October 4, one of the numerous people who received it was a reporter from the NY Times who, rightfully so, mused if universities can do it all. The musing is indeed valid; not all universities can have programs, especially majors, in all areas. However, when the university in question is one of four major research universities of a system, one might indeed expect those four universities to be able to do it all, or at least most of whatever all is. This would include the likes of Italian, one of the programs under the proverbial knife at the University at Albany, SUNY.

Unfortunately, the situation with Italian at the University at Albany, SUNY is not unique. In the past few months we have heard of other places where Italian is under attack. The University of Tennessee has informed their faculty that the major in Italian will be eliminated, and Italian will be reduced to language teaching; a curriculum of advanced courses for those who wish to major in Italian will not longer be available. The same has taken place at the University of Nevada, Reno. There, where one lone professor over the years has succeeded in building a program (the Minor in Italian), this year the University announced that the Minor in Italian will be eliminated, and, similar to what is planned at the University of Tennessee, Italian will be limited to first- and second-year courses.

The history of Italian studies programs in the United States is long and convoluted, and I shall spare you that history. There is, I would nonetheless submit in the meantime, an analogy to the specific problem at hand; and it is in the issue of anti-Italian defamation through mediatic representation that many of our co-ethnics have indicated and lambasted over the years. In discussing the many roots and continuation of the anti-Italian defamation issue, one aspect that arises is the lack of support from the community at large for those fighting this anti-defamation plight.

Having begun teaching Italian in 1972 at a high school in Stamford, Connecticut, and then later



passing on to the college/university level, I can confidently, and sadly, state that support from the Italian/American community at large has been minimal, at best. Now, one might argue that there is a bit of a town-gown gap at both the high-school and college/university levels. Perhaps; but this is for another blog, I would submit here. Nonetheless, this support, to be sure, has not increased in any significant numbers over the years, though studies of this sort have not been conducted. What we do know from a most recent survey conducted by NIAF/Calandra is that of the 5,261 K-12 students who have responded, 3,540 (67.2%) indicated that their parents suggested they study a different foreign language; and of those 3,540 students, the top two languages were Spanish (65.5%) and French (25.8%).

What does this tell us? For one thing, as a community at large we need to become (1) more versed with why Italian should be studied, and (2) more involved with the teaching of Italian from a community perspective. It basically underscores the need for a greater responsibility on the Italian/American community at large to come forward, defend in an informed manner the teaching of Italian, and, when necessary, to protest these changes.

Dr. George Philip, President
University at Albany
State University of New York
1400 Washington Ave.
Albany, NY 12222

Dear President Philip:

In a world of increasingly blurred, and still blurring, boundaries, many of us in the Italian teaching community, and beyond, are incredulous that a college/university, especially one within the SUNY system, would find it logical to eliminate numerous language programs with one proverbial stroke of the brush (<http://www.albany.edu/news/9902.php?WT.svl=news>) [3], as announced in the news release as “substantial reduction scenarios.”

Are French, Italian, and Russian so inconsequential that entire programs—undergraduate and graduate, as we have been made to understand—can be so readily annihilated, with no attempt to work through the financial crisis that faces most of us?

President Obama has recently launched a national campaign that makes the case for better educational systems within the United States. Yet, SUNY Albany seems to be moving in another direction. If we within the university systems do not underscore the importance of teaching and learning languages other than English, then we shall only fall further back in our standing within the international world of education.

Knowledge of a language is, without a doubt, the best way to access a country’s culture. We simply



cannot presume to engage our international friends (and foes) with a seemingly colonialist attitude that underscores English as the world's lingua franca and everyone else who wishes to deal with us must simply know English. This defies the migratory history of our country and, dare I say, our state.

Indeed, that this takes place in a state such as New York, with an immigration history second to none, is, simply stated, shocking. French Creole, Italian, and Russian are three of the six languages included in NYC's Mayor Bloomberg's 2008 Executive Order 120, which calls for citywide language access to the approximate 1.8 million people just in NYC with limited English skills.

All this to say that not only are we dealing with a loss of cultural knowledge of other societies by the elimination of the above-mentioned programs, but the practical issue of the three languages above is also rendered unavailable for those who might need such knowledge. We in the state of New York should be taking the lead in furthering knowledge of other languages and cultures. Instead, SUNY Albany seems to be moving in another direction, to the day of our Federalist Papers.

As Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature and the Immediate Past President of the American Association of Teachers of Italian, it is mine as well as the hope of others that our state legislators, together with others, will take up the issue immediately and convince you to revoke for the good of our institutions of higher education such a draconian, and potentially damaging, decision.

Sincerely,
A.J. Tamburri

Cav. Anthony Julian Tamburri, Ph.D.
Professor & Dean
John D. Calandra Italian American Institute
Queens College/CUNY
25 West 43rd Street, 17th Fl
New York, NY 10036
Tel: 212.642.2094
Fax: 212.642.2008
www.qc.edu/calandra
www.cuny.tv/series/italics
<http://twitter.com/Tamburri> [4]

"Where is there dignity unless there is honesty?" Cicero

----- Forwarded Message

From: <XXXXX>

Date: Mon, 4 Oct 2010 22:15:51 EDT

To: <anthony.tamburri@qc.cuny.edu>

Subject: Termination of the Italian, French, Russian Classics Programs and Theatre Dept.



Dear Professor Tamburri,

I am writing you following the suggestion of XXXXX, my friend and former Professor at XXXXX. My name is XXXXX. I am an Associate Professor of XXXXX Language and Literature at the State University of New York at Albany.

On Friday, October 1, around 2:00 p.m., without any previous warning (except for a short e-mail sent us on Wednesday, September 29, in which the Dean and the Provost invited us to discuss the future of SUNY) we were called in a meeting by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and by the Associate Vice-President of Academic Affairs.

In a few minutes we were told that our Italian Program had been suspended since that very day, and that it will be terminated within 2012. In less than 2 hours our Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures was eliminated; in fact the French Program, the Russian Program, and the Classics Program were suspended as well.

The only survivor is right now the Spanish Program which was always bound with us (on the official documents we have always been defined as the "Hispanic and Italian Program," for more than 30 years); and the rumor is that it will be amalgamated with the Department of Latin -American and Caribbean Studies. The Department of Theatre has also been suspended.

In my Department more than 15 tenured Faculty (Full and Associate Professors) and a great number of Adjunct Faculty have been practically thrown on the road after decades of outstanding work (always recognized as such by the administrators); and that has happened in spite of their programs filled with enthusiastic students, especially at the Undergraduate level.

The only explanation we were given was that there is no money; and the suggestion that we were given was to find a job elsewhere.

This event has been devastating. My colleagues and I are shocked. The older ones have the possibility of an early retirement, but faculty who is 50 -53 years old (as in my case) are really in a tough situation.

My case is worse than others, since I am more at risk: I am alone in this country. (XXXXX). I am a single mother of an autistic boy of twelve, of whom I have the sole custody. I just bought a house a year ago and I have to pay for the mortgage for many years. My son Stanley loves his house, his school, his friends; he had just reached a certain stability and now the very thought of moving from here and giving up the house is devastating to him.



The two women who work as Adjunct Faculty in the Italian Program are excellent teachers who handle in an outstanding way the many tasks in the Program and are indispensable to it. They need to work because there is no one supporting them. Even for them, losing their job would be more than devastating.

The only consoling thing is the outpouring support of our colleagues all over the country, who are uttering their solidarity to us and their protest to the administrators; and also we are impressed by the overwhelming support of our students (who love Italian, because the majority of them are Italian-American of second or third generation, and come from the Albany area, but also from NYC, Long Island, Rochester, Syracuse).

Our Italian Program is important as the main point of reference for the Italian - American community of Albany, since there are no other programs of Italian in the Albany area. Its termination would be a sore loss for the Italian -Americans of this region.

I am confident in your help and I hope in an outreach of support, so we can find a fast and effective way to save the Italian Program and the other eliminated Programs at Suny at Albany. Nothing is written in stone yet, and the next two weeks are crucial.

I am adding below the list of the administrators to whom a letter of protest should be sent, along with a request to revoke their decision.

Thank you so much, also on behalf of my colleagues.

Sincerely, with a lot of hope and gratitude,

XXXXXXXXXXXX

CC:

George Philip, President: presmail@uamail.albany.edu

Catherine Herman, Vice-President: cherman@uamail.albany.edu

Susan Phillips, Provost: provost@uamail.albany.edu

Eldegard Wulfert, Dean of Arts and Sciences: ewulfert@uamail.albany.edu

Sen. Diane Savino, President, Conference of New York State Italian American Legislators
Members, Conference of New York State Italian American Legislators

Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations



American Association of Italian Studies
American Association of Teachers of Italian
Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance
National Italian American Foundation
National Organization of Italian American Women
Order Sons of Italy in America
UNICO

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