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Retiring prof saw NKU progress

Zaniello winding up 37 years

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A common question when Dr. Thomas Zaniello started at Northern Kentucky University in 1972 was "You're not from around here, are you?"

But when the English professor retires this spring after 37 years of teaching at the Highland Heights campus, the New Yorker answers different questions.

To newly minted professors starting at the university, his advice is simple.

"Teach what you research and write about; research and write about what you teach. NKU faculty have a heavy teaching load and I soon learned that to stay creative in the classroom and to pursue my research issues I had to economize. Often what I have published has grown out of assignments I used in class," he said.

For students, Zaniello suggests finding a mentor.

"Find a professor - or even two - whose teaching you really respect and whose approach stimulates your imagination," he said. "Take lots of classes with him or her, and hopefully he or she will become your faculty mentor. In Honors we urge our students to try to find such a professor by the second or third semester here."

Zaniello has taught English his entire career but became director of the Honors Program in 1995.

He came from New York by way of New Jersey and earned his undergraduate degree at Tufts University in Boston.

He then moved on to Stanford to earn his Ph.D. before settling in Highland Heights.

"Before going to Stanford University I had never been further west than York, Pa., where Fran, my wife, is from," he said.

Building a university in those first few years meant doing things that weren't required at other universities such as "establishing a curriculum, helping the administration in the 1970s to understand what a university was as opposed to their early vision of a feudal outpost of progress, and building a campus life," said Zaniello.

Zaniello said some of the challenges the university has faced during his time include the establishment of a challenging curriculum, a strong campus building campaign, a university that challenged its students to think nationally and internationally without forgetting its relationship to the local community, increased international study by students, and a lively and creative community of theater, music, dance, and the arts.

"These and many other important things I may be forgetting had to be built from scratch and they were," said Zaniello.

Zaniello said he's seen some of the best progress in the last decade.

"Faculty, staff, and administrators from all units, especially in the last 10-plus years, began actively working together, especially under President (James) Votruba. Too often in the past academic and administrative units competed rather than cooperated," he said.

Zaniello has already set his retirement plans.

"I am moving to Washington, D.C., to be near my children and grandchildren, teach a course or two at local universities, work in some area film festivals, and stay by the phone in case (President) Obama calls for advice," he said.
