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## UO president makes return to classroom (with video)



UO

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*President Richard Lariviere lectures on Sanskrit to 9th graders*

It sounded like a recipe for distraction: a university president and career academic lecturing on an ancient language to a group of 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students from blue-collar families.

Wrong recipe, right ingredients.

University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere offered an engaging lesson on Sanskrit – tracing the ancient Indian language from its 3,000-year-old roots to its assimilation by Nazi Germany and its enduring, almost mystical legacy as the language of perfection.

And a roomful of fully-absorbed – and fully awake – students from the UO's SAIL (Summer Academy to Inspire Learning) Program listened, interacted and questioned throughout last month's presentation.

"It's why I get out of bed every morning – to promote and preserve the opportunity to do exactly this," Lariviere told a KEZI-TV reporter who was on hand for the lecture. "It's great."

SAIL is a free weeklong day camp intended to equip bright but disadvantaged youths with the knowledge and tools necessary to make college a realistic option for them. Students from low-income families are recruited as

eighth-graders, and those who complete the first year's camp are invited back each year through high school.

Lariviere's Aug. 10 lecture was a highlight of SAIL's Aug. 9-13 sessions for freshman and sophomore groups. The program's junior and senior groups were on campus the previous week.

Sanskrit originated in an area between the Black and Caspian seas, and derivatives of the language spread south and east through present-day Iran and into India, as well as northeast into Russia and even into northern Europe, Lariviere told the students. Elements of Sanskrit can be found in Latin and the language derived from it.

Perhaps the most captivating part of Lariviere's lecture was his explanation of how Nazi Germany co-opted the Sanskrit word for "the good people" – Aryan – to describe their supposed superior race. The Nazis also borrowed the Sanskrit "svastika" – until then, a widespread symbol of good luck – and used it as an emblem of German nationalism and centerpiece of the Third Reich's flag.

Lariviere was amused when he moved into the UO presidents' house – which was built in the 1920s – and discovered swastikas among the many symbols of good luck in a tiled entryway.

He also told the SAIL students that early Indian scholars believed that "all that is worth knowing is in Sanskrit," and that long-ago teaching methods differed greatly from those of today. Prospective students were required to memorize entire textbooks before they were accepted as students, then were taught the meanings behind what they had memorized.

"I'm telling you, we have the ability for astonishing amounts of memory," Lariviere told the students.

SAIL was initiated in 2006 by Bruce Blonigen and Bill Harbaugh – both economics professors at the UO – as a one-week, economics-focused day camp for 15 Springfield Middle School students who would be entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade that fall. It topped 100 students this year.