

ASU Transborder Studies pioneer retires

Regents Professor Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez leaves legacy of service to the state and education

By Veronica Sanchez, ASU News
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If the conditions of one's birth are any indication of destiny, Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez's life's work can be traced back to his birthplace of Nogales, a Southwestern town split by the U.S.-Mexico border, with part in the American state of Arizona and part in the Mexican state of Sonora.

Later, as [a professor](#) in Arizona State University's [School of Transborder Studies](#), Vélez-Ibáñez — who officially retired from the university on May 15 — taught subjects that explore issues affecting people on both sides of the border, from the economy to history, language and more.

Vélez-Ibáñez, founding director emeritus of the School of Transborder Studies, arrived at ASU in 2005 and was instrumental in establishing and shaping the school in 2010, making it the only one of its kind in the nation. He also helped usher in the university's [College Assistance Migrant Program \(CAMP\)](#) in 2016, which supported first-year students from migrant and seasonal farmworker backgrounds with academic guidance, personal mentoring and financial counseling. Over the course of 10 years, CAMP served more than 270 students, reaching a retention rate of 92%. The federal government cut funding for the program in 2025.

"We've graduated people who are officers in the military, people who have created social service agencies, lawyers, doctors, teachers ... so the impact has been enormous," Vélez-Ibáñez said.

The School of Transborder Studies is designed to go beyond teaching traditional Chicano and Latino history, focusing instead on border regions worldwide and the state and federal policies within those borders that shape people's lives. Before 2010, that wasn't always the case.

"Up to then, Chicano studies had basically just been studied up to the border," Vélez-Ibáñez said.

Now, the school includes studies on both Mexican and American issues, and global borders in general.

In 2011, Vélez-Ibáñez was [named a Regents Professor](#), the university's highest faculty honor, for his achievements as both a scholar and an admired educator.

"He always encouraged me to participate in class, and I think that's his best quality as a professor," said Afkar Tashwirul, a first-year PhD student from Indonesia who wants to take the lessons he's learned back home to understand his own country's complicated border. "Despite having much

experience and a highly recognized reputation, I think he's very humble."

Master's student Diana Gallardo said Vélez-Ibáñez taught her about the North American Southwest region's complex past and the lasting impacts of different historical forces.

"He allowed me the ability to build a critical framework upon which I could develop a more analytical way in which to view the world around me," Gallardo said.

Tashwirul and Gallardo attended the annual class trip spearheaded by the School of Transborder Studies, which took them to Vélez-Ibáñez's birthplace of Nogales. There, students learn about the U.S. side's approach to irrigation, health, art and city planning, and how those spaces are supported by officials in Mexico. Across the border, students step into Nogales, Mexico, and learn about food, artists and the rich history on both sides of the border.

Vélez-Ibáñez leaves a large legacy at ASU, marked by global recognition and decades of mentoring and scholarship. His research has been impactful in shaping policy at the state level. Through robust and tedious research, Vélez-Ibáñez spent decades shaping Arizona's growing educational landscape by showcasing the practical skills within Mexican-origin households and influencing bilingual education policies. In the early 1980s, he documented the economic and social exchange systems used by families along the border, leading to the 1988 Community Literacy project and the 1990 Funds of Knowledge for Teaching project.

The work was instrumental in showing Arizona teachers how to use students' experiences in the home as classroom assets, not weaknesses. He observed that Mexican-American households in Arizona formed strong exchange networks to share resources and information, countering the "culture of poverty" narratives rampant at the time.

Many of his former students have gone on to create nonprofits that serve communities in Arizona, such as [Aliento](#). Yet, his greatest thrill as an educator does not unfold through data, but rather in the classroom when he is lecturing to students.

"I like to see their eyes when I say something and it instantly means something to them. If they get a concept right away, you can tell by their eyes," he said. "If it's not working, I move the conversation another way to find something they can connect to."

During his last month as an ASU professor, Vélez-Ibáñez became more reflective about his final days in the classroom but admitted he was feeling frustrated due to funds being cut for CAMP.

"I still have a lot of work to do," he said. At the school, work on reestablishing funding for the program continues, and even though he is retired, Vélez-Ibáñez plans to support the cause — not just CAMP, but the work of the entire school.

"We have to find our place and talk about the multidimensionality of our population, not its singularity, but the historical multidimensionality," he said. "And that includes equality and the political power of our people."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Regents Professor Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez, founding director emeritus of the School of Transborder Studies, has retired. Photographed on April 30 in his office with diplomas, honors and artwork, he reflects on his keepsakes, saying, “Everything has a story.” The school, established in 2011, explores border regions worldwide and policies shaping lives, extending beyond traditional Chicano and Latino history, which previously focused mainly on the border. Now, it addresses both Mexican and American issues and global borders. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News