MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS DONALD K. SMITH

Donald K. Smith, emeritus senior vice president of the University of Wisconsin System and professor of communication arts, died December 26, 1999, at age 84.

At a symposium honoring him on April 29, 2000, numerous colleagues presented tributes, several of which are quoted below. Born November 29, 1915, in Belgrade, Nebraska, Donald graduated from Kearney State College, Nebraska, in 1936 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Education. After three years as a Nebraska high school teacher and principal, he came to the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Here, from 1939 to 1942, he earned a master’s degree in the Department of Speech while teaching English and speech at the university’s Laboratory School. His graduate study was interrupted by World War II service in the United States Army. From 1943 to 1946 he served in the infantry, advancing from private to captain. He was awarded the Bronze Star for uncommon valor and the Purple Heart after incurring a serious wound during military action in March of 1945 at Remagen on the Rhine River. After the war, Don returned to the University of Wisconsin and its Department of Speech to continue graduate study with a major focus on the history, theory, and criticism of rhetoric and public address. He received his Ph.D. in 1951.

Professor Smith’s professional career commenced at the University of Minnesota, where in 1949 he was appointed lecturer in the Department of Speech and Theatre Arts, a year later assistant professor, in 1953 associate professor, and in 1956 professor. For four years he was chairman of his department. As a teacher, said Professor Karlyn Campbell, a former student of Don’s, he was erudite, witty, and kind—a role model.” Don received the University of Minnesota’s Outstanding Teaching Award in 1955. His work in higher education administration began at Minnesota in 1963 with appointment as an assistant, and later an associate, vice president for academic affairs. From 1968 to 1971, he was vice president, administration. He then served until 1973 as resident director of the MUCIA/AID Indonesian Project in Higher Agricultural Education in Indonesia. As a university administrator Don was a master of diplomacy and eloquent, stated Emeritus Dean Fred Lukermann. Former colleague and co-author Robert Scott said that regardless of role Don was “always the same person” because the great constant was his integrity, his “abiding ethical sense.” Don returned to Wisconsin in 1973 as senior vice president of the University of Wisconsin System, a position he held for seven years, during which time he served with two presidents, John Weaver and Edwin Young. He was widely regarded as a founding architect of the University Wisconsin System. Emeritus President Edwin Young remarked that Don was committed to the principle of shared governance and to the idea that the university’s quality depends not on the number of buildings or the size of the budget, but on “the quality of the faculty.” He added, “This university system . . . and Madison are better because Don Smith was here.” Said Emeritus Chancellor Irving Shain, Don’s personality, character, and intellect made him “a truly unique individual” who made important contributions to the university “UW-Madison would be quite a different institution today if Don had not fought hard to maintain its quality,” especially during budget crises. When Don retired from system administration, the Board of Regents said “His exceptional abilities as a spokesman for higher education, his discerning wit and insight on practical approaches to educational administration and his instinct for leadership in unprecedented situations led to an unparalleled reputation as an educational statesman. He advanced with enthusiasm and effectiveness his belief in the value of quality education, delighted in intelligent debate, and in his personal relationships exhibited respect and a humane understanding of the views of others.” At the symposium honoring Don, former regent David Beckwith commented “He was a great leader, . . . a wise, thoughtful, eloquent man. He had extraordinary courage. He had political savvy mixed with character . . . and a fine-tuned sense of humor.” Katharine Lyall remarked “I will always remember him, not only as an ‘educational statesman,’ but as our educational statesman, without whose work we would be much less than we are today.”

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In 1980 Don returned to the role of professor in the Department of Communication Arts. He taught a basic course enrolling over two hundred students each semester, presided at the weekly rhetoric colloquium, served in the Faculty Senate and on department and university committees, conferred with students, advised colleagues, and was in all respects an ideal citizen of the department, college, and university. As colleague Edwin Black remarked, Don “revered learning,” “incarnated humane values” and embodied Aristotle’s notion of the phronemas, or “man of practical wisdom,” the person to whom “the community turns when it wants to know where to go and how to get there.”

Retiring in 1986, Don continued an active life. He and his wife Eileen traveled widely. He wrote on problems in higher education. He composed letters and memos addressed to editors of newspapers and journals and to chancellors and deans. His letters to Bascom Hall prompted Chancellor David Ward to refer to Don as “my most famous stealth senator” and an exceptionally “wise elder statesman of the faculty.” As the retirement years passed, Don’s body wore down, but his remarkable intellectual capacities remained keen. Until his final weeks, he took great pleasure in intellectually rich conversation and debate with friends. Speaking for Don’s many friends, Professor Yi-Fu Tuan said “In knowing Don, I’ve come to know friendship, and with it, a reinvigorated interest in the world. . . . I enjoyed my conversations with Don. In his presence the world seemed weightier. . . . In his presence I felt unusually intelligent. What more can one ask of a friend.” Don was the author of an outstanding textbook, Man Speaking, and co-author of four books--two with his former teachers at Wisconsin, Andrew Weaver and Gladys Borchers, and two with his Minnesota colleague William S. Howell. His many published essays focus on rhetoric, public address, history, and education. In 1969, the National Communication Association presented him the Winans Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Rhetoric and Public Address. At the time of his death, he was revising a book-length manuscript on the nature and problems of the contemporary public mega-university, in particular the University of Wisconsin. In this work he intended “to describe the nature of the transformation of the public research universities in the postwar era and to interpret this transformation as sufficiently revolutionary as to threaten the demise of the university as it has grown and been known.”

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