



2019

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Recommended Citation

Dedianous, Tyler () "Faculty Updates | Honoring the Life of Dr. Robert Leekley," *The Park Place Economist*: Vol. 27

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/parkplace/vol27/iss1/9>

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Faculty Updates

Honoring the Life of Dr. Robert Leekley

Tyler Dedianous

The Illinois Wesleyan University community recently suffered the loss of Economics professor Dr. Robert Leekley, who passed away on January 1, 2019. He was an integral part of the University and had contributed to it in so many ways. His career at IWU started when he first came to teach 45 years ago, after getting his Ph.D. from Michigan State University. With a strong focus in the economics of public education at the doctorate level, he strived to improve the learning experience of students and helped shape the Economics program at IWU to where it is today.

While at IWU, he developed an interest for the applied econometrics classes and felt that they could be improved. Fast-forwarding about 30 years from when he first came to IWU, he would actually go on to write and publish an applied statistics textbook that has been widely used in the Statistics for Business & Economics class. Despite Dr. Leekley's main courses being focused on microeconomics, labor, and of course, statistics, he would teach most of the economics courses while at IWU, including ones in environmental economics and public finance, showing that he was not only a well-rounded but also a passionate professor.

The students and faculty also agree that Dr. Leekley's passion in teaching was clear. Ray Bolton '18, who is now working as a Bank Examiner at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, recalls that even with health challenges and medical problems during his last couple of years at IWU, he rarely missed a day of class, and always made sure to have tutors available during the week in case a student felt more comfortable going to a peer with questions. To Dr. Seeborg, who witnessed Dr. Leekley's punctuality and persistence over the 29 years of working alongside him, says that his consistent perseverance was remarkable and admirable. He recalls: "You could set your watch on when he would arrive on campus. [...] He loved the rhythm of the University and was always a part of it". Indeed, Dr. Leekley truly enjoyed being at IWU, and that was reflected through his massive involvement with the Economics Department and the University.

As a professor, he cared deeply about his students' learning and progress, as well as their research endeavors. Dr. Risa Kumazawa '94, who used to be Dr. Leekley's student and later on a visiting Economics professor at IWU, and now a professor at Duquesne University, remembers how he always dedicated his time to students to ensure he could answer every single one of their questions. Paul Dolan '94, who is now a Director at *Target*, agrees with Dr. Kumazawa, recalling that he never cut time short during office hours and always ended every session on a positive note, regardless of how challenging the material was. His commitment to helping the students truly learn new knowledge and removing some of their stress and uncertainty about exam grades so that they could focus on the material itself left a strong impression on students like Ray

Bolton and Dr. Kelsey Hample '10. Now an Economics professor at Furman University, Dr. Hample realizes that the understanding and patience he showed to her and her fellow classmates are what can really shape students' learning. "At the end of the day, Dr. Leekley cared more about his students actually learning and applying concepts rather than who they happened to learn it from. It was always student first, everything else second" - Ray Bolton recalls.

For many students at IWU, Dr. Leekley's classes were the determinants that got them engaged in learning the applications of Economics. Dr. Todd Kumler '07, who is now a Senior Manager at *Cornerstone Research*, agrees with the other alumni in saying that it was Dr. Leekley's applied statistics and econometrics classes that got them eager to learn more; while for Dr. Hample, her experience in *Environmental Economics* with Dr. Leekley inspired her to choose her concentration in responsible forestry and agriculture in graduate school over her initial interest in human capital accumulation.

Outside of the classroom, Dr. Leekley dedicated his time to his students' academic research. He advised around 30 Research Honors projects while at IWU. At times he would take on as many as four in a single year. However, even with the large number of research projects he was involved in, he was always extremely dedicated to being there for his students whenever they needed him. His colleagues admired this dedication about him, and Dr. Seeborg especially appreciated how he always spent an amazing amount of time helping students learn and achieve signature work by the end of their research projects.

Dr. Leekley is also remembered fondly by his colleagues for how helpful he was to them. For a period of time, Dr. Leekley served as the Economics Department Chair. It was also during this time that Dr. Durbal joined the Economics Department at IWU. She can still picture how he helped her settle in both her coursework and research at IWU. She recalls: "I always felt that I could go to him with any questions or concerns I had. He was always ready to listen and extremely supportive." Later on, when Dr. Mendez served as the Department Chair, he was astounded by the amount of time and effort that Dr. Leekley had put into keeping track of the students through the major/minor, recording every single course that every single student had enrolled in. Some professors even hold pleasant memories of him outside of work. For Dr. Ghosh, those memories were the long conversations they had on weekends about various topics ranging from the history of IWU to other aspects of life where they had common interests. It is clear that the faculty members of the IWU Economics Department will always remember him as what Dr. Seeborg describes: a wonderful colleague.

Dr. Leekley worked at IWU as a professor for 44 years, and he will be remembered by the students and faculty for many years to come. He left behind many memories and life lessons for students and colleagues alike, and is forever in their thoughts as a person of patience and understanding with great perseverance in doing what he loved. Many will carry on the legacy of his words, as those whose lives he touched has branched out into the world with his principles in mind.

This edition of the *Park Place Economist* is dedicated to Dr. Leekley, and we would like to thank him

with our utmost gratitude for his endured support. For the last 26 years that it has existed, the PPE has been an amazing learning experience for every editorial board member, which could not have been possible without him. It is our hope that his passion and dedication will be lived on through the PPE.