Retirements

Robert V. Robinson

Rob Robinson says the luckiest day in his life was the day that he interviewed at Indiana University. Lucky because it was the beginning of his 35-year career at the university and, even more importantly, because it was the day that he met someone who would become his long-term collaborator in all things in his life, his future wife, Nancy Davis. This also was a very lucky day for the Department of Sociology, the College of Arts and Sciences, and Indiana University, for Rob has been an inspiring and award-winning teacher, a highly prolific and influential scholar, and an unusually generous and civic-minded member of the community.

Rob joined the IU faculty in 1979 after completing his Ph.D. at Yale University and his A.B. at Brown University. Since then, Rob has served in every major leadership role in the Department of Sociology – including director of undergraduate studies, director of the Sociological Research Practicum, director of the Institute of Social Research, co-director of the Preparing Future Faculty Program (which received the 2001 American Sociological Association’s Distinguished Teaching Award), and department chair. In recognition of his contributions to teaching, research, and service, Rob was selected as the Class of 1964 Chancellor’s Professor in 2002.

In a period when the academic community has been criticized for not paying enough attention to teaching, Rob has convincingly demonstrated that commitment to teaching need not be at the expense of research excellence. Through his own example, he has shown how the two can be, and should be, mutually reinforcing.

There are good reasons why Rob was the recipient of multiple teaching awards; among them, the Department of Sociology’s Edwin H. Sutherland Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Trustees Teaching Award (five times), the Sociology Graduate Student Association’s Outstanding Mentor Award, and the university’s Sylvia E. Bowman Award for Distinguished Teaching. He is intellectually inspiring, clear and organized, articulate, sympathetic to the needs of students, and challenging to students. Whether teaching a large lecture class with over 400 students or a small seminar, whether working with undergraduates or with graduate students, and whether advising one student or a group of students, Rob absolutely excelled. And Rob truly believes in the great potential of each of his students. As he once wrote:

Michelangelo said of his sculpting that he wasn’t chipping away stone to create the figure but he was “releasing” what was already inside the stone. My goal in working with students is to empower them to realize their own potential and strengths and help them to develop these to the fullest.

Rob’s influence as a teacher and a mentor will last a long time. As his former student, Jocelyn Viterna, a professor at Harvard University, notes: “Rob Robinson taught me what it means to be a mentor. He took me on as an advisee after my two previous advisors left IU, even though his research area was not closely related to my own. He listened carefully, he reflected slowly, and then he provided advice based on what I wanted, not on what he thought I should want. Our conversations always made me feel like a colleague, like a valued scholar, like a ‘real sociologist,’ not like a
peon graduate student. And Rob taught me one of the most valuable lessons of my academic career. He taught me how to stand up for myself, to make sure I got credit for the work I had done, even when this meant disagreeing with scholars who had much higher power and status than I. Rob pushed me to be tougher, but he also promised to stand behind me if push ever came to shove, providing a safety net as I learned what it means to be my own best advocate. Without doubt, Rob is the person I most try to emulate in my own mentoring of students today.”

As a scholar, Rob has profoundly shaped thinking in not one, but two, sub-fields of sociology: sociology of religion and social gratification. Rob’s publication record would make most sociologists covetous. His success in publishing (frequently in collaboration with Nancy Davis) in what many consider the holy trinity of sociology journals – the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces* – is remarkable. Even more remarkable is the impact that he has had on how sociologists think about social justice, trust in others, community, class inequality and how it is perpetuated, and the influence of religion and religious orthodoxy. For this work, Rob and Nancy have received multiple awards, including distinguished article awards from the American Sociological Association (ASA) Section on the Sociology of Religion (twice) and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Also receiving accolades – including an Independent Publisher Book Award and the Scholarly Achievement Award of the North Central Sociological Association – is Nancy and Rob’s recent book, *Claiming Society for God: Religious Movements and Social Welfare in Egypt, Israel, Italy, and the United States*.

Rob is so much more than his CV. As Linda Dahlberg from the Centers for Disease Control writes: “As I reflect on my years at IU and the people who made a difference in my life – you certainly come to mind. I have always had tremendous respect and admiration for you and the way you approach people, work, and life. You bring out the best in people.”

We will miss Rob’s warmth, decency, kindness, and generosity of spirit.

Brian Powell