

Memorial Resolution of the Academic Staff Assembly of the University of Wisconsin-Madison On the Death of James “Jim” A. Steele, Former Associate Registrar for Student Records

The basic premise behind the Wisconsin Idea is that members of the University of Wisconsin-Madison community should work to improve lives beyond the campus. James “Jim” Arthur Steele lived this principle through his role as the Associate Registrar of Student Records. He progressed the student records profession both on a campus and national level while being grounded with a single principle to provide the best possible service to our students. On January 24th, the university lost a true champion for higher education when Jim passed away after a lengthy, unfathomable battle with Scleroderma.

Jim graduated with high honors from University High School in 1970, MacMurray College in Jacksonville, IL in 1974 (cum laude) and earned an MFA from Illinois State University (ISU). An avid thespian, Jim worked at the Wisdom Bridge Theater in Chicago, but soon came to his senses, and returned home to start his career in academic administration at ISU. Jim continued his career in higher education with the Department of Admissions and Records at the University of Illinois–Urbana in 1986. Jim joined the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Office of the Registrar in 1992 as an assistant registrar, and after many wonderful accomplishments, became an associate registrar in December of 2007.

As an active member of the campus community, Jim continually improved the services the Office of the Registrar provided to students, faculty and staff. While he worked on an array of campus committees, his input and influence on those committees always kept students at the forefront. Jim also served as a longtime resource to the University Academic Planning Council where he advocated for the student during key curricular decisions.

Jim’s affection of the theatre came as no surprise as he loved working on stage – at every commencement ceremony. He had a great deal of respect for the ceremony and enjoyed seeing the students collect their diploma. To Jim, witnessing the students’ joy as they crossed the stage verified his purpose in higher education.

This past spring the Office of the Registrar nominated Jim posthumously for the UW-Madison Chancellor’s Award. Jim’s legacy was honored when he was chosen as the Chancellor’s Award recipient – an award given to a campus leader who has provided distinguished service to the university community and student services. Even though most of Jim’s work might be considered “behind the scenes,” every letter of support for his nomination highlighted his ability to collaborate with campus colleagues. He always put students first.

Mike Pflieger, Assistant Dean in the College of Letters and Science, best summarized Jim’s contribution to the university in his supporting nomination letter for the SPA award: “What I respect most about Jim was his dedication - Jim DID things. Jim played an instrumental role in transforming our student information systems and, in so doing, helped to usher in a new era of student service. . . . I used to say there were fifty people upon whose shoulders rest the entire infrastructure of student information – Jim held one corner all by himself – he had big shoulders.”

While students were always Jim’s priority, he also served the faculty and staff of our institution. One of the reasons why we think Jim didn’t retire when his illness was making him weaker was that he absolutely loved being part of the Academic Staff Executive Committee, which he was elected to in 2011. In their letter supporting Jim’s nomination for the Chancellor’s Award, the Academic Staff Executive Committee wrote, “His commitment to academic staff governance became even more clear after his passing. In the last several weeks of his life, he would call in to meetings when he was feeling able . . . even from afar and in failing health, Jim participated in weekly meetings and continued to provide valuable comments and suggestions. That type of persistence and dedication to service is something we all admire and aspire to . . . we feel that collectively we can affirm the broad, campus-wide impact that our colleague had on students, staff, and student services at the UW-Madison.”

More than a kind-hearted man and dedicated colleague, he was also a loving husband and dutiful father to his family. He is survived by his wife Patty and daughters Laurel (Colin) Erskine and Meredith (Dan) Steele Heibel; his sisters Julie (Brent) Anderson and Jan Larsen; his dad Russ, as well as many nephews, nieces and other family. He was preceded in death by his mother in December, 2011.

Jim was stoic, wise, easy-going, and had an incredibly dry-witted humor. Jim’s professionalism and sustained commitment brought credit to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He will be remembered as an asset to our campus and the higher education communities in the state and nation.

Jim’s contribution toward the betterment of our campus will always be cherished in the minds of everyone who had the honor to work with him.

Respectfully submitted,
Scott Owczarek, University Registrar