

Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin–Madison on the Death of Emeritus Professor and Emeritus Dean Phillip R. Certain

Phillip Robinson (“Phil”) Certain, emeritus professor of chemistry and emeritus dean of the College of Letters and Science, died on August 11, 2020, at Agrace Hospice in Fitchburg, Wisconsin. He was 76 years old and had lived gallantly for several years with progressive supranuclear palsy. Phil was recognized as a scientist, teacher, scholar, administrator, and community leader. He was admired for his integrity, dignity, and decency in all aspects. His life exemplified the Wisconsin Idea.

Phil was born September 21, 1943, in Savannah, Georgia, the second of five children. He graduated from Groves High School in Garden City, Georgia, in 1960. That spring he was chosen by the Georgia Department of Commerce to be one of 21 students in the state to take a week’s bus tour as part of their Student Teacher Achievement Recognition program. Also on the tour was his future wife, Melinda Whitman. In the fall they both entered Emory University in Atlanta and married in 1964. During his senior year, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. After receiving BA (1964) and MS (1965) degrees in chemistry, he entered graduate school at UW-Madison in 1965 as an NSF Predoctoral Fellow in theoretical chemistry. Phil received his PhD in 1969 under the supervision of Professor J.O. Hirschfelder and then spent a year in Manchester, England, as a NATO Postdoctoral Fellow and Ramsay Memorial Fellow.

In 1970 Phil joined the UW-Madison Chemistry Department faculty, teaching general chemistry, junior-level physical chemistry, graduate-level theoretical chemistry, and doing research in theoretical chemistry. He advised more than twenty masters, doctoral, and postdoctoral students, and authored more than 50 scientific publications. He was awarded Sloan, Fulbright, and Guggenheim fellowships, and elected Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Phil served as Chair of the Department from 1982 to 1986, before being appointed Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, 1986-89. In 1987, he served as Acting Vice Chancellor (now called Provost). After two years back in the Chemistry department, he was named Associate Dean for Natural Sciences, College of Letters and Science in 1991, and became Dean in July 1993. He retired in September 2004.

During his tenure as Dean, he maintained and even increased the quality of the College in the face of numerous budget cuts. He was successful in maintaining the quality of the faculty in all areas. He advocated for the creation of the Center for Humanities and the International Institute. He introduced freshman seminars to ensure a small class experience within a large university. He supported innovations in undergraduate education and outreach to the broader community. He obtained funds for building renovations for Ingraham Hall (International Studies), Chamberlain Hall (Physics), and the Washburn Observatory (L&S Honors Program) and for new construction (the Shain Research Tower of Chemistry). He recruited and mentored women and underrepresented minorities for faculty and staff appointments and for academic leadership positions.

His philosophy of education is summarized in the invited essay [The Future of the Liberal Arts](#), found in *Proud Traditions and Future Challenges*, a volume celebrating the sesquicentennial of UW-Madison. In this essay, he emphasized the breadth of the liberal arts, encompassing the humanities and the sciences, as well as the challenges facing the liberal arts in the modern world. His vision for the faculty is contained in the essay [Desirable Qualities of a Faculty Member](#).

Phil served on many campus committees, including the campus Undergraduate Education Committee and the faculty Physical Sciences Divisional Committee. At the national level, he was a Consultant/Evaluator for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association and helped review more than 30 universities for reaccreditation. He served as President of the Colleges of Arts and Sciences Council. He also served on the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars advisory board for the Senior Fulbright Program, and as a member of the review panel for sub-Saharan Africa. He served as Wisconsin delegate to the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy, which oversees the national telescopes, including the Hubble telescope. He helped provide funding for the Wisconsin group at the facility in Geneva which discovered the Higgs boson.

In retirement, he organized and led a seminar for department chairs, program directors, and dean's staff to increase their knowledge of the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2005-2008); served on the UW Design Review Board, which reviews all major remodeling and new construction projects at the university (2010-2015); chaired several committees to review the performance of college deans; and served as President of the UW Retirement Association (2013-2015).

In the community, Phil was an active Board member of Madison Opera and from 2016-2018 served as President of the Madison Opera Board of Trustees. With a fellow Board member, he helped devise several outreach activities surrounding the successful 2014 production of the opera *Dead Man Walking*. Phil served for ten years (2002-2012) on the Board of Trustees at Edgewood College, and as Chair of the Board (2008-2010). He was a member of Town and Gown. He was a member of First Congregational U.C.C. for over 50 years and has held many offices including Moderator (2011), Treasurer (2015-16), and chair of the Board of Stewardship. In 2011, he helped lead a successful \$2 million campaign. His community service included helping prepare turkeys for the church's annual Thanksgiving dinner for the community and helping serve lunches to the homeless at Luke House.

Phil was deeply committed to broadening access to the university and increasing diversity among students and faculty. In addition to his efforts within the university, he served on the Board of the Madison Urban League and the Affirmative Action Advisory Committee of the Madison Metropolitan School District. He was on the Mayor's Task Force on Race Relations. He also gave strong support to the creation of the International Institute at the university. In the words of Emeritus Provost and Chancellor John D. Wiley, he was "one of the very best, most creative, and responsive Deans I could even imagine, much less work with."

Phil was a caring colleague and leader. He was a remarkable man whose actions and contributions shall help generations live the Wisconsin Idea.

Memorial Resolution Committee
Bassam Z. Shakhashiri (Chemistry), chair
Ludwig W. Bruch (Physics)
Katharine C. Lyall (Emeritus President UW System)
Alexander Nagel (Mathematics)