

Prof. Emeritus Charles Backstrom

Reflections on

Teaching and Advising, Research and Writing

(Excerpts from *Poli Sci Connection*, the newsletter of the
Political Science Department at the University of Minnesota, Winter 2002)

On Teaching and Advising

Prof. Backstrom believe that the most important learning occurs for students when they receive written comments from their instructors on their research papers and exams. Prof. L. Earl Shaw recounts a story in which Prof. Backstrom wrote a note on a student's paper stating she had done an excellent job and suggested she consider going to graduate school. Later, the student visited Prof. Backstrom's office to discuss his comments. She indicated that no one ever told her before that she had graduate school potential. She later enrolled in graduate school. Prof. Backstrom routinely wrote notes on outstanding papers in which he offered to write letters of recommendation for gifted students.

Prof. Backstrom was sensitive to students' needs and concerns. He realized that what took place in the classroom was only a part of the total academic experience. He recognized that students had personal issues which could impede their progress toward degree completion, financial concerns which often deterred exceptional students from pursuing creative research projects, and that many students were unprepared for or unsure about pursuing careers in public service.

One of the most difficult and challenging aspects of his teaching career involved stepping out of his role as "professor" and stepping into the role of "adviser or counselor." He was once told that he is not personally responsible for everything that goes on in a student's life. Although it would have been easy to refer these students to other offices on campus, Prof. Backstrom was concerned about the student's whole being, not just his or her academic life.

Because of his outstanding skills as an adviser, Prof. Backstrom was the first recipient of a newly created award called the John Tate Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Advising. Richard Tollefson wrote in his nomination letter, "Many people have asked my assessment of the quality of education at the University of Minnesota. In discussing the matter some people characterize undergraduate education at the University as impersonal and uncaring. This characterization does not describe my experience at the University, largely because I had the good fortune to meet, work with and be advised by Professor Charles Backstrom. I believe I

could not have obtained a better undergraduate education than I had at the University of Minnesota. Professor Backstrom played a large part in that education, not only inside but, I think more significantly, outside the classroom."

Prof. Backstrom understood that lack of finances hindered talented students from pursuing special research projects and participating in public service internships. He vividly remembers a specific case of an honors student who proposed a thesis in which he would survey the State College System. The project entailed spending a week traveling around the state and visiting the state colleges. In the end, the student did not have the financial resources to cover his travel expenses and was unable to do the project. This was the type of student Prof. Backstrom immediately thought of when he received a memo from Mary Hicks in the Development Office.

Mary was working with Judge Earl and Mrs. Cecill Larson, two University of Minnesota alumni, who wanted to provide some financial support to students in the social sciences. Prof. Backstrom wrote a proposal detailing his plan for using these scholarship funds and his proposal was immediately accepted. Suddenly, his prayers were answered. Prof. Backstrom believes that if it had not been for the Judge Earl and Mrs. Cecill Larson scholarships many of our alumni would not be where they are today.

For 25 years, Prof. Backstrom was instrumental in organizing and supervising the internship program. In the early days, he recalls one of the first questions he was asked by legislators is "When will we get to meet these young men?" Prof. Backstrom raised an eyebrow and responded, "What do you mean, 'young men'?" They responded, "Well, this is for men, isn't it?" Prof. Backstrom told them in no uncertain terms that "the University is for men and women and that the University would not get involved with the program unless it is equal for men and women." Women are now well represented in all of our internship programs.

Prof. Emeritus John Turner remarked at Prof. Backstrom's retirement dinner that initially many of the faculty were not in favor of the internship programs but the way Charlie ran his, this internship program was

“first rate.” When Prof. W. Phillips Shively served as Chair, he wrote, “I am proud of our department’s internship program, and the program is due entirely to Prof. Backstrom. This program is a labor of love for him.” Perhaps former Congressman Bill Frenzel summed up his years of involvement in the internship program best when he said that we need more concerned individuals like Prof. Backstrom “to take this kind of personal interest in a program which stimulates our young Americans, with the hope that, as adults, that interest will become active participation. I feel that one of the most important things I have done as a Congressman is to provide that opportunity.”

Since its inception, hundreds of students have interned in the state legislature (many have gone on to run for the Minnesota State Senate or House of Representatives); in Washington D.C. for congressional offices and the White House; and in nonprofit agencies; as well as in places like Northern Ireland, the British Parliament, Senegal, and Kenya.

On Research and Writing

Prof. Backstrom’s friend and colleague, Prof. John Turner, used to say, “I’ve finished this book, but it doesn’t sing.” Prof. Backstrom, like Prof. Turner, works on his writing until the prose becomes a thing of beauty. The first edition of *Survey Research* which he wrote with Gerald Hursh-César, was his favorite book. He says, “there’s a beauty in clearness and brevity.” Years later he still enjoys opening this book and reading a section because it was so well written. Prof. Backstrom views this book as some of his most significant writing because “*Survey Research* shows that even though surveys are hard work, they are not hard to understand. This is an important contribution to make. If people are going to do surveys, they should be done right.” *Survey Research* sold 80,000 copies. He recalls talking with coauthor Gerald Hursh-César who was the director of UNICEF in South Asia. On one of Hursh-César’s trips to Katmandu, Nepal, he introduced himself to a business associate and was greeted with the response, “I know you.” The business associate produced a copy of *Survey Research* from his bookshelf! This book is one of the 5,500 books included in the Great Wall of Books at the McNamara Alumni Center. Prof. Backstrom has taken his grandchildren to the alumni center and challenged them to find their grandfather’s book on the Great Wall of Books!

Prof. Backstrom has also published several articles. In 1977, “Congress and the Public: How Representative is one of the Other?” was published in *American Politics*

Quarterly. He devised a chart by which congress could be studied. He believes systems can be analyzed and charts are helpful in identifying categories and studying the natural progression of the process. As one of his class assignments, he gave his students copies of the article and asked them to explain why a publisher would hesitate to accept the article. After some serious thought, one of his students came up with an answer. He said, “It was too clear; you have written so simply and directly that it doesn’t seem like the findings are that important.” Prof. Backstrom had not previously considered that his writing could be too clear to be taken seriously.

In 1987, Prof. Backstrom and coauthor Leonard Robins wrote an article “The Supreme Court Prohibits Gerrymandering: A Gain or a Loss for the States?” which was published in the *Publius Annual Review of Federalism*. The Supreme Court declared Gerrymandering unconstitutional based in part upon Backstrom’s and Robins’ article. Prof. Backstrom believed that Gerrymandering was discriminatory toward African Americans. Justice Stevens cited their article in his decision. This is quite a significant event. Few academics have their work cited by the Supreme Court. He went to Washington to hear the oral arguments even though he was suffering from a severe cough and pains in his chest. At the conclusion of the oral arguments, he took a taxi to the hospital where he was diagnosed with two broken ribs.

Prof. Backstrom and coauthor Leonard Robins wrote many articles on AIDS, one of which, “The Politics of AIDS,” was published in *Health Politics and Policy* in 1996. Prof. Backstrom became involved in this research because he was chair of the Faculty/Student Committee when the AIDS epidemic broke out. When asked if his articles on AIDS had an impact on public policy, he felt his writings contributed, but only slightly. In the course of his writings, he learned a great deal about AIDS and was able to document the success of the public health officers in controlling how public policy dealt with the AIDS question. Prof. Backstrom believes that the AIDS situation did not become as bad as it could have been had it not been for some courageous legislators.

* * *

During his academic career, Prof. Backstrom has touched the lives of many students. He has had a tremendous impact on the students, the Department of Political Science, and the University. His legacy continues on well after his retirement.