

# Retirements

## **CHARLES BACKSTROM**

In addition to a small plaque that reads: “*If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, what does an empty desk signify?*” the office of Professor Charles Backstrom also houses an interesting wooden structure sitting atop two file cabinets. It is comprised of several thin shelves which contain his maps – vital tools that have characterized his teaching style at Minnesota since 1959. “It’s fantastically heavy,” says Backstrom, who wonders what will happen to this map case made with his own hands. After thirty-seven years of teaching courses on Minnesota politics, campaigns, and elections, he will be retiring in December of 1996. As a graduate of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he taught for two years at Eastern Michigan University, followed by a two-year experience in Washington – first as a Congressional Fellow and then as a staff member of the House of Representatives – before accepting a teaching position in the Department of Political Science at Minnesota.

The department, and the University as a whole, have changed a great deal in the years that Backstrom has been here. In terms of Political Science, he praises the “constant improvement in quality, in students, in staff, and in the program.” On the contrary, he feels that the University has gone from enjoying a place of “high prestige in the state legislature to having less impact. Polls show that the ‘U’ still has influence, and is important to the community, but is subject to criticism. It used to be that the legislature paid one-third of the University’s cost.” Today, only 20% is funded by the state. Backstrom believes that it is hard to maintain a strong department if the University overall is deteriorating. “The saddest thing about leaving the University is that you want to leave one in good shape as opposed to one in an accelerating cascade toward mediocrity.” He is proud of the efforts of department members such as Edwin Fogelman, Virginia Gray and Robert Holt to “save this place. The University seemed extremely strong, but I see now that any institution is only a web of interpersonal roles and relationships that is very fragile, and when some people tear at it, it can fray easily.”

In his retirement, Backstrom plans to “rest up for a while. I’m tired,” he says. In addition, he is finishing current research, teaching two classes, and selling one house while buying another. But he still has writing projects. With a smile, he mentions that he will also edit his Ph.D. dissertation on the Progressive Party of Wisconsin. He plans to work on it in response to the Wisconsin Historical Society’s request in 1956 to publish the dissertation if he “eliminated the political science.” “In the cover letter I’ll say ‘Here’s the revised manuscript that you requested...forty years ago.’” Professor Backstrom’s presence will be sorely missed in the Department.

*Professor Backstrom’s accomplishments include Director of the Internship Programs and several publications. His most recent include: “State AIDS Policy Making: Perspectives of Legislative Health Committee Chairs” In AIDS and Public Policy Journal No. 10 (Winter 1995) and “The Media and AIDS: Health Elite Perspectives of Coverage” in Journal of Health and Social Policy (forthcoming 1997).*