

Teaching Innovator

Remembering Jack Kampmeier, a former dean, professor of chemistry, and a champion of teaching at Rochester.

EVERY MONTH OR SO, AT 7:30 IN THE MORNING, A SMALL group of faculty from across divisions of the University meets for breakfast at the Mt. Hope Family Diner, about a half mile from the River Campus, just south of the Medical Center.

It's a gathering of friends with a common interest and a serious purpose: to foster innovative teaching at the University, grounded in the copious research on the brain and human learning that has emerged in the past couple of decades.

This spring, there's an empty seat at the group's circular table. That seat belonged to Jack Kampmeier, professor emeritus of chemistry, who by many accounts did more than any single person at the University to promote innovative teaching since he joined the faculty in 1960.

Kampmeier died in March after a short illness. Although he'd become a professor emeritus in 2005, he was "the most unretired retired person I've ever known," says Vicki Roth, the director of Learning Assistance Services at the College who collaborated with Kampmeier on many projects.

Just weeks before his death, he was in the midst of preparing a lunchtime seminar as part of a program called Sharing Innovations in Teaching, spearheaded by the Mt. Hope group.

"In my last meeting with him, he asked me, in the nicest possible way, if I would kind of pick up the pace a little bit on some work that we were doing together," says Roth. "He wanted me to keep up with the work he was doing. He was very busy at the end of February, with a lot of things he was planning to do and work with us on."

Kampmeier demonstrated his commitment to teaching early in his career. In the late 1960s, he led an overhaul of the undergraduate chemistry curriculum, making students better prepared for independent research. He won the two most prestigious teaching awards for faculty who teach undergraduates: in 1974, the Edward Peck Curtis Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, and in 1999, the Goergen Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching.

As dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, a position he held from 1988 to 1991, he oversaw the hiring of Roth to establish Learning Assistance Services. The two worked side-by-side developing and honing the workshop model of teaching and learning at Rochester (see "Teaching Centered," page 22). That model, in which undergraduates who have previously excelled in the course lead groups of between eight and ten students as they work through problems collaboratively, began in Kampmeier's organic chemistry class. The

method was later adopted, largely in response to student demand, in other chemistry courses, as well as in biology and philosophy courses, and in graduate courses at the Simon School and the School of Nursing.

The success of the workshop program inspired Kampmeier to forge a University-wide interest group, called a cluster, in Leadership in Education. Established in 2008 and funded by the University Committee on Interdisciplinary Studies, the cluster members organize lunchtime seminars in which a guest faculty member shares methods of teaching developed in one




TOP TEACHER: Shortly after joining the faculty in 1960, Kampmeier emphasized ways to improve teaching, first in his home department of chemistry and later through initiatives such as peer-led teaching workshops and other efforts throughout the University.

discipline, with the idea that often methods adapted to one discipline may inspire effective innovations in others as well.

In his annual address to the Faculty Senate last January, Provost Ralph Kuncel reflected on the attributes found in the finest teachers: passion for the subject, caring for the students, and confidence in the ability of learners to take materials and form connections on their own.

About midway through his address, he asked the group: "Are excellent teachers born, or is teaching excellence a skill that can be learned?"

Kampmeier stood up and said, simply, "There is a reliable research literature about how people learn. And the more we learn about that literature, I think we can hone and develop our skills." 

—KAREN MCCALLY