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4-25-2010

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Recommended Citation

University Relations, "Professor Bert Ahern: history lived and history studied" (2010). *Campus News Archive*. 1471.

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Professor Bert Ahern: history lived and history studied

Summary: As retirement approaches, Ahern reflects on the opportunities afforded at Morris.

(April 25, 2010)-Wilbert Ahern, professor of history and American Indian studies, remembers the pitch Morris's first chief administrator, Rodney A. Briggs, used to entice him to begin his career at the still-new University of Minnesota, Morris in 1967. "He told me I'd be opening up liberal education to a wide cross section of society," recalls Bert, who continues to embrace that vision. As retirement approaches, he reflects on the many opportunities afforded at Morris—open minds, innovative teaching, collaboration, research, and sharing its mission with Janet Ahern, wife and colleague.

A sense of possibility

Together, Bert and Janet, retired voice and opera workshop instructor, tally 75 years at Morris: Bert 43 and Janet 32. When they arrived, the college was young with a seven-year history and "a sense of development and possibility."

Bright, motivated students have been a career constant, but Bert notes that "transformations" were sometimes more dramatic in early years. "These days, most students have a broader exposure to higher education," reflects the Horace T. Morse-University of Minnesota Alumni Association Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching recipient. "In earlier days, I frequently watched students, often from small towns, really 'catch on fire' here at Morris."

Benefits of a small, academic community

Shaped by history colleagues Truman Driggs, Jack Imholte, and Ted Underwood, Bert relished the influence as well of "junior" colleagues Mimi Frenier, Roland Guyotte, and Harold Hinds, and the opportunity in the last decade to welcome a new generation of historians. He appreciates the advantages of a small, academic community. "The discipline knows each other well, but we also cooperate with people in different areas. I've enjoyed sharing ideas across disciplines with folks like Professors Van Gooch, Paula O'Loughlin, Dwight Purdy, Engin Sungur, and many others."

He especially appreciated the collaborative spirit during his service as Division of the Social Sciences chairperson from 1987 to 1995. "The opportunity to support excellence among my colleagues and bring outstanding new faculty to the campus," he remembers, "far overshadowed the budgetary and personnel difficulties of the duties."

Innovation and collaboration are career-long themes. Bert knew from the beginning that Morris would be "a place where you can do more than the same thing year after year." In 1969, he and Imholte, among others, worked on the "Training Teacher Trainers" program. Their efforts led to the establishment of the Minority Student Program (MSP), now Multi-Ethnic Student Program. "UMM's powerful, unusual form of liberal education was public," Bert states. "We had to make it accessible and a place where everyone would prosper. We were convinced the best way to strengthen education for African American and American Indian students was to have more teachers who grew up with the same experiences, which justified MSP."

A strong advocate for programs that encourage faculty in scholarship and in teaching Bert remembers, the Minnesota

American Association of University Professors chapter and the University's Center of Educational Development retreats in the 70s providing exciting pedagogy and curriculum discussions, innovative and flexible teaching ideas, that planted seeds for Freshman Seminar. "As professors, we come to our appointments as scholars not as instructors," Bert says. "We can learn to be better teachers, however, through collaborative study and practice. As faculty we need to grow." He helped design and then served as director of the Faculty Center for Learning and Teaching from 1993-94 and 2001-4.

Research: American Indian boarding schools

When Bert arrived at Morris, he didn't know the campus had been an American Indian boarding school, but personal history inspired interest, as did his dissertation on African American history. In 1968, an American Indian policy symposium was held on campus, and he made an profound connection: The forces behind the Morris American Indian boarding school were shaped by the same people he studied for his dissertation on the crusade for equal rights for ex-slaves.

Influenced by the history of his mother's birth on a reservation, his grandfather's Federal Indian School Service teaching from 1897 until 1917, his dissertation research, and campus history, Bert began investigating the American Indian boarding school period. In 1984, he received the Solon J. Buck Award for best article in Minnesota History, "Indian Education and Bureaucracy: The School at Morris, 1887-1893." In 2002, the Minnesota Historical Society Press reprinted the article in *The North Star State: A Minnesota History Reader*. Currently, he is working on a book, *An Indian Heart and A White Man's Head?: Returned Indian Students in the Assimilationist Era, 1880-1928*.

From 1998-2008, Bert served as director for the Bush Foundation's Tribal College Programs, an insightful opportunity to reflect on the past, present, and future.

"Boarding schools were very destructive, often with inadequate funding," says Bert. "But Native people were very interested in education. Knowing it was important, they found ways to take value from a misguided system. Now, it has come full circle. Four leaders of tribal colleges, all grandchildren of first generation boarding school era students, are national leaders in contemporary Indian education."

Bert and Janet are grateful they could both follow their academic callings as partners at Morris. "We'll miss our colleagues, faculty and staff," they share, "the wonderful students, and conversations with eager open minds."

In addition to his service as division chairperson, Bert was acting dean during 1978-79 and fall 1992. He earned a doctorate and a master of arts from Northwestern University in Illinois and a bachelor of arts from Oberlin College in Ohio.

Retirement celebration

A celebration in honor of Professor Bert Ahern will be held on Monday, May 3, 2010, at LaFave House from 4 until 5:30 p.m.

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.