

# Viewpoints

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TOM PALAIMA: REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

## UT Professor Woodruff an invaluable teacher

I recall a conversation I had with Professor Paul Woodruff, a close friend and colleague at the University of Texas at Austin, about a dozen years ago. In retrospect I know that one person can make a difference.

Woodruff was then serving as director of the Liberal Arts Plan II Honors Program, a position he held from 1991-2006. He was more than the director of this rigorous program in the humanities and sciences. Woodruff was what Socrates was to his pupils, a resident "genius," the guiding spirit who embodied the values and ways of teaching, learning and living that have made Plan II, now for more than 75 years, a truly life-changing cultural experience for the faculty, staff, students, parents, visiting scholars, alumni and alumnae connected with it.

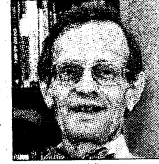
The influence that all those people from Plan II have had on others in their continuing lives makes Woodruff's impact on society as a whole incalculable. But this is just one of Woodruff's marks on higher education at UT Austin.

While director of Plan II and later as the first dean of the School of Undergraduate Studies (UGS) (2006-12), Woodruff used his creative talents and inexhaustible energies as a classicist, philosopher, playwright and carpenter and his experiences as a military officer in Vietnam, a university leader, a husband, father and concerned citizen, to mark himself out, quietly and modestly, as a Renaissance man.

Woodruff designed and built from Texas woods beautiful large seminar tables for classrooms. He made them elliptical in shape so that they would not have a single focal point. Those seated around his tables are not spatially conditioned during discussions to listen to one set of opinions. They do not look to a single authority figure. Professors naturally become fellow students, in the literal sense of the word, individuals "eager" to seek the truth together with enrolled students.

Woodruff also crafted accurate, readable and engrossing translations, with clear explanatory notes, of tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, of key passages on the concepts of justice, power and human nature in Thucydides' history, of four key dialogues of Plato.

Woodruff understood what Elizabeth Vandiver (UT Austin Ph.D. 1990) calls in her recent book on British war poetry the "importance of classics as a source 'to think with.'" So he worked for years to make



Paul Woodruff's most lasting mark involves curriculum development.

sure that students of all ages would be able to read and think through the questions the ancient Athenians publicly posed about the problems we still confront in our lives. Woodruff knows that as Americans living in a free and democratic society, each of us bears the burden of charting our own course and figuring out how we want to live for ourselves and for others.

Still not content, Woodruff made a broader impact with books that draw upon his deep knowledge and practical experience of ethics, philosophy, politics, the art of leadership, play writing and performance.

He has written three books (in 2001, 2005 and 2008) full of discussions, based on ancient Greek, ancient Chinese and modern thought, that get us as readers to think about how to be reverent in our lives; how democracy works or doesn't work and what the serious consequences are in either case; and the vitality of dramatic arts in shaping cultural ideas. Still more books are forthcoming. They will challenge how we view ourselves. They will make us want to do better than we are now doing.

It is arguable, however, that Woodruff's most lasting mark in his still continuing career — he has just stepped down as dean of UGS — is the role he played in addressing a major shortcoming in curriculum. In that conversation, some 12 years ago, Woodruff spoke pensively about how few UT professors specialized in ethics and how few courses within individual disciplines addressed ethics as a major topic.

This problem was identified, too, in the Report of the Commission of 125 in September 2004. 125 top civic, educational, cultural, political and business leaders strongly recommended that all UT students "examine questions of ethics and the attributes of effective leadership."

These courses are now in place in UGS, under Woodruff's leadership. I just taught my first ethics course. Students can now take up ethical issues in their particular disciplines before they have to face them in their lives ahead.

If you want to know why what starts on the Forty Acres changes our world for the better, think of Woodruff.

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