



W. David Conn

Professor, City and Regional Planning

1947 - 2017

Learning from a Learned Colleague: Reflections on W. David Conn

David engaged with the world by asking two questions. First, what is life asking of me, and second, how can I match my talents with one of the world's many needs?

All of us need to spend a few minutes answering David's questions. David Conn, a wonderful City and Regional Planning professor, a kind soul, and a champion for making Cal Poly a better university suddenly passed away on Tuesday, March 8, 2017. David's early career was, in his words, as an "economist/planner" concerned with hazardous materials policy.

David asked us a lot of questions. Not that he needed to, but because he wanted to make sure the right questions were being asked in order to get a proper interpretation of the answers. He saw "gaps" between conversations. For example, scientists were not producing information policy makers needed. The right people were not being asked their opinions, or for the proper use of their expertise. Possibly, there was simply a need to have people talk to each other more and build mutual understanding. Fairness, ethical, and rational thinking were tools David always used in research endeavors, teaching, and interpersonal relations. All of us who worked with him learned a bit about being better people by observing how he used these tools.

We now understand that his current work on diversity and intergroup dialogues is an application of his earlier concerns with "the gaps" and how to fill them. Life was asking him to help "close the gaps" and to learn to listen for the interpretation of others. His recent work reflected a more nuanced approach to closing the gaps" by fostering intergroup collaboration to leads to personal and social responsibility toward greater social justice. In Ken Topping's words "David was enthusiastically interested in making the world a better place."

He always spoke from the heart and possessed a keen wit that made each conversion with him, a pleasant experience. David spent a more than a decade as Cal Poly's Vice Provost for Academic Programs and Undergraduate Education, where he provided the vision and the leadership that improved undergraduate education. He closed his administrative career at Cal Poly as Vice President for Institutional Review. Knowing that real knowledge takes knowing about the world from many perspectives he invested in interdisciplinary courses such as the UNIV series and the Honors Program that led to him being honored

for “extraordinary contributions to student success.” Due to David’s vision and support, City and Regional Planning was able to offer CRP 333 Disaster-Resistant Sustainable Communities under the UNIV program. As a professor of City and Regional Planning, he taught environmental planning and research methods. David advocated, in word and deed, for a more inclusive society where people gained by sharing experiences with each other. This led to a pioneering new course with the Psychology Department entitled Intergroup Dialogues, which is now part of his legacy.

Hemalata Dandekar, CRP professor, puts it this way “David was just a good human being, and smart.” One knew it in every interaction with him. That was always a consideration with David, to live a “balanced” life between work, personal endeavors, and family. All were ever important to him. David grew up in England. He met his wife, Judith, when he was 15 years old, and they remained devoted to one another until the day he died.

David treated EVERYONE as his equal, and he had no ego and no arrogance. He did not think of himself as “better” than others just because of his higher education. In his mind, the janitor was due as much respect as the President of Cal Poly (he cared about the underdog). He always found something to laugh about, and this made other people happier. The respect that people express about David tells us that he did find ways to match his talents with some of the world’s many needs.

Before coming to Cal Poly, David taught at Virginia Tech and UCLA. He shared his experiences with all who needed his time and wisdom. He is missed.

*William Siembieda
PhD.; Professor and former CRP Department Head.*

