Wirth Named Oxford Visiting Professor

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2/06/09--In recognition of the popularity of a workshop he has developed for environmental law science and policy students, Oxford University conferred upon Boston College Law School Professor David A. Wirth the title of visiting professor of Geography last semester. This formal affiliation with the historic English university, which lasts until October 2013, ensures that Wirth will be able to build upon a mentoring relationship he has forged in recent years with the students and faculty at the Centre for the Environment at Oxford.

Drawing on his experiences as a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and as a former senior attorney at the National Resources Defense Council, Wirth has every year since 2003 visited the Centre in order to run a rigorous, two-day workshop, including a simulated multilateral negotiation for students pursuing an MSc in Nature, Society and Environmental Policy.

"[Wirth's] commitment to our MSc programs has allowed us to develop a truly global perspective on environmental policy and regulation," said Gordon Clark, Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the School of Geography and the Environment at Oxford University. "We greatly admire his ability to combine the realities of international negotiation with a deep understanding of the science of the environment."

"It has been exciting for me to engage with students in this simulation each year," said Wirth. "The quality of the students' work rivals what I've seen at [United Nations] Security Council."

Students come from all over the world to take part in the Nature, Society, and Environmental Policy graduate program. The twenty-eight students in the most recent graduating class hailed from fourteen different countries. Alums of MSc program that participated in Wirth's simulation include Ian Bowles, now the secretary of energy and environmental affairs for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts with whom Wirth co-taught the seminar for several years.

Most students taking part in the simulation act as representatives of a participating nation's delegation. These delegations must form a consensus on international requirements for the trade of toxic pesticides and chemicals that kill thousands of people in the developing world every year. Wirth serves as an impartial chairman, and a handful of students act as "nongovernmental observers" - representatives of nonprofits, chemical companies, and trade associations with the same rights to speak from the floor as the national delegations.

Wirth in recent years has begun leading the simulation for his environmental law students at BC Law as well. One of those students was Matthew Hoisington, Law 2009, who has taken three of Wirth's classes: International Law, US Foreign Relations, and Trade and the Environment. "[The simulation] was very indicative of the difficulty in negotiating an international agreement," he said. "Professor Wirth does a great job of setting up the different facts given to each participant - i.e. making sure that they are sufficiently polarizing."

Hoisington worked at the United Nations Headquarters last summer and said he was struck by
a similarity between how deals were ironed out there and how a compromise was reached in Wirth's negotiation.

In Wirth's simulation, "students were able to see the difficulty of negotiating in a formal setting compared to the relative ease of hashing out solutions during the so-called coffee breaks that Prof. Wirth suggested we take," said Hoisington. Similarly, at the UN, "most of the substantive negotiations took place in the small room that adjoins the Security Council chamber, outside the eye of the camera," he said.

Wirth next plans to run the simulation at BC Law in Spring 2009 for the new 1L course in globalization and this coming spring for Oxford's graduate students.