

In Memory of Philip C. Sorensen: A Legacy that Continues To Instruct

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When Phil Sorensen joined the Ohio State law faculty fourteen years after graduating from law school, he had already been elected Nebraska's Lieutenant Governor. He had run for Governor as his party's nominee. He had headed a foundation and chaired a national nonprofit organization dealing with corporate responsibility. Before all of that, he had clerked for a federal judge and practiced law—an impressive resume. Still, what was more significant than his resume was the deep wisdom that Professor Sorensen brought to his twenty-two years of law teaching. Here are a few of the lessons I learned from Professor Sorensen.

You can be the first to figure out a solution for a problem that has remained unsolved for years.

Professor Sorensen showed how that could be done. As Lieutenant Governor, Professor Sorensen played a key role in broadening Nebraska's tax base and making it more equitable.² As a law professor, he noticed how law scholarship had narrowed over time, and he broadened the scholarly approach of many of his colleagues by designing and putting in place the Socio-Legal Studies Center at Ohio State and establishing a partnership with the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies at Oxford University. Colleagues joined his initiative (later renamed the Center for Interdisciplinary Law and Policy Studies), and began using a more comparative and an interdisciplinary approach in their own scholarship.

You can make people laugh while achieving something serious.

One way that Professor Sorensen persuaded colleagues of the value of including social science perspectives in their work was to host discussions on matters of interest from a variety of perspectives. For example, as the law building's renovation neared completion, faculty began talking about what policies or rules (seniority or random) should be put in place to determine the order in which each faculty member could choose an office. Professor Sorensen convened a law faculty discussion of the office-assignment issue with the ground rule that law faculty had to pretend to be economists seeking to optimize efficiency. Amid laughter, faculty suggested a variety of un-law-like proposals, including allowing faculty members to sell their prerogatives to select a choice office. They emerged from the meeting laughing, but also more current with the Coase theorem of efficient distribution and appreciative of the value of broadening disciplinary perspectives.

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²I also grew up in Nebraska and followed his efforts in the news.

By showing interest in each colleague's ideas, you can contribute to productive collegiality.

Professor Sorensen often organized gatherings of faculty members who might have been unlikely friends. His enthusiasm for learning from each person was contagious. Soon others in the gathering would follow the amiable and appreciative listening approach that he modeled. By the time that I arrived on the faculty, most faculty members considered divergent viewpoints to be a faculty strength, rather than an irritation. Having watched him in action, I attribute much of the faculty's collegiality to Professor Sorensen's informal leadership.

If strategic with your time, you do not need to give up a balanced life in order to accomplish a great deal.

Professor Sorensen said, "Some people live to work. I work to live." While taking on a number of initiatives in the demanding job as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and starting the Socio-Legal Studies Center, as well as teaching and writing, Professor Sorensen found time for what mattered deeply to him—his wife, Jan Sorensen, and four children. Together they enjoyed cultural events—here and in London—and maintained a farm. He retired from teaching law with time to develop as a serious sculptor, as well as to enjoy his family and other cultural pursuits. Yet he accomplished more than most lawyers during his legal career.

Philip Sorensen was a kind and brilliant man who made a positive difference as a lawyer and left a legacy that continues to instruct.