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Darth Vader

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Darth Vader

*John B. Kirkwood**

Soon after becoming a full-time faculty member, I decided to ask Tom Holdych for his advice on a teaching issue I had encountered. Finding him in the faculty lounge, I started to raise my question, but before I could finish, he interrupted: "You probably don't want my advice. The students think of me as Darth Vader."

I had the pleasure of co-teaching Law and Economics with Darth Vader one semester, and it was an experience I shall always remember, not only for the mock harshness that Tom employed—which earned him the sobriquet—but also for the many other qualities that made him an exceptional teacher. But let me start with that combative attitude.

When I ask a student a question, I usually try to recognize whatever is good or useful in the student's answer before following up with a question or comment designed to correct any errors that might have been made. In Law and Economics, however, Tom didn't have time for that. When a student gave an answer that Tom thought was off the mark, he would simply say "wrong" and move on to another student. If that student also failed to provide the correct answer, Tom would again reply "wrong" or just "no." There would be periods in Tom's classes when he would stand at the front of the room, call on a series of students, and announce in rapid succession: "Wrong. No. No. Wrong. No."

At some point, feigning increased exasperation, Tom would ask, "Did you take Contracts?" (or whatever other subject provided the answer). How was the student supposed to respond? The question usually produced complete silence. Fortunately for the rest of us on the faculty, Tom never tried to determine which professor had failed to teach the student the pertinent concept.

Of course, the students were not actually upset by Tom's mock harshness. They found it entertaining, and more importantly, understood that it reflected Tom's deep devotion to them. Students realized that when he finished dismissing their incorrect answers, he would take whatever time was necessary to explain the idea he wanted to convey. Likewise, students knew he prepared his lectures and questions with great care, making sure that they were lucid, rigorous, and interesting.

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And Tom was superb at coming up with clever examples to illustrate his points to students.

Tom's students reciprocated his devotion. The atmosphere in the class—despite its superficially combative tone—was warm, positive, and often enthusiastic. Outside of class, students welcomed the opportunity to interact with Tom, and at alumni events, he was regularly the center of attention.

Tom was a towering figure, and we—his students, colleagues, and friends—shall miss him enormously.