John Phillips, a professor of British history died prematurely on January 14, 1998. Although only forty eight years or age, Phillips was in his twenty second year at UCR. Born and raised in the south, he attended the University of Georgia, where he was an Honors’ student and elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his senior year. His long interest and service at UCR for this fraternity stemmed from his pride his at being chosen a member as an undergraduate.

Phillips’ interest in history led him to enroll in the excellent graduate program at the University of Iowa. Attracted to English history, he sought to apply the quantitative methodology that was popular in the seventies to English elections of the late eighteenth century. What Phillips started, he finished, and usually quite rapidly. He was awarded an M.A. after one year and a Ph.D. five years after leaving Georgia. The quality of his research impressed a history department search committee and he was hired in 1976 (although he was only twenty six at the time) to replace Jack Beatty. This was no mean feat since the others on the short list were from Cambridge University, Johns Hopkins and Stanford.

The judgment of the history department was validated during Phillips’ long career. He established himself as a major scholar with recognition in Britain as well as the US. His two books were widely acclaimed by historians as very significant contributions to the scholarly literature on modern Britain. Phillips was not a typical historian but a psephologist who relied on careful archival research in poll books. For his first book, published by Princeton, he carefully studied four boroughs during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Using the most advanced quantitative methodology, Phillips came to the conclusion that religion was the key, the bedrock, the indisputable variable for an understanding of English voting patterns. Surprising at the time, his results came to be accepted and led to the revival of interest in the relationship between religion and politics.

In the eighties, he turned to the British voting reform of 1832. An older generation believed it to be the crowning moment in English history. A younger generation dismissed it as a reform without impact. Phillips was critical of the latter view. His painstaking study of English towns convinced him that a political revolution began with the reform bill. His book on the subject was published by Oxford’s Clarendon Press and a major article on the subject appeared in the American Historical Review. His reputation soared and shortly before his death he was invited by Oxford University to examine doctoral students in British political history - a rare and signal honor for an American scholar. At the time of his death, he had written several chapters of a study of the 1834 Municipal Corporations Act. Phillips was not someone who tried to meet the minimal research demands of the university. Rather, he was trying to raise them, if anything. This does not make one popular. He did apply the highest standards to himself first. His record was such that at the age of 46 he was already a professor V.

Phillips also distinguished himself as a teacher. He received the Senate Teaching Award in 1990, despite teaching required courses of 3-400 - courses we would all agree are the most difficult to teach. He was so popular with students that they would continue on to enroll in large numbers in his upper division British history sequence. He usually taught an overload, and continued to do so during his three years as Chair of the department. Teaching takes place outside the classroom as well as inside. He may have been unique in spending up to twelve hours a day in his office with the door ajar. Any student could approach him at any time. His office hours were five days a week and eight hours a day. He wound up helping many graduate students in other areas of history who drifted in his direction because of his availability and high standards. All he demanded of those who sought his help was a
willingness to work hard. Quite a few students whom he assisted went on to successful careers. If you impress upon students, as Phillips did, that their reach should exceed their grasp “or what is heaven for,” as he did, wonderful things can happen.

Turning to his service contribution to UCR, Phillips was Chair for three years of a not very harmonious department, nevertheless, eighty per cent of the faculty voted in 1995 that they would be content if he stayed on as Chair. This was a genuine tribute that neither Phillips nor the faculty had anticipated. The department prospered under his guidance. In three years we went from no representation in ancient history to great distinction. He hired extremely gifted and accomplished senior women. Conflicts, of course, existed, but they were kept within the bounds of civilized discourse.

Phillips took on the major responsibility of directing the Phi Beta Kappa organization on campus. He single-handedly ran the fraternity for many years. After his death three faculty members were appointed to replace him. In addition, he served on CAP, a time-consuming task, and continued to do this while on a resident sabbatical. He gave his all to the university because he was one of the dying breed of academics who viewed the university and the calling of a professor as sacred.

What struck one most about John Phillips was his boyishness, his bounce, his ebullience. He had a quick step, seemed to look younger with each passing year. He was a man of enthusiasms, but could, on occasion, be self-deprecating. When one praised his achievements, he often replied, “You have not seen my wife’s CV. I am the sluggard in the family - she is the star.” With the death of John Phillips at an early age, the history department and the campus have suffered a major loss. That students continued to put flowers outside of his office door for several months is just one indication of the deep imprint Phillips made on the UCR community.

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