The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Paul Olum, professor, mathematics, and dean, College of Natural Sciences, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
PAUL OLUM

Occasionally we are fortunate to encounter someone of such remarkable talent and character that, though the encounter may be brief, the effects are significant and lasting. That was the nature of the relationship between Paul Olum and The University of Texas. Although his time on our campus was limited to the two years he served as professor of mathematics and dean of the College of Natural Sciences (1974-76), his spirit and his memory continue to motivate us 25 years later.

When Paul was first suggested as a candidate for dean, Professor Jack Kiefer of Cornell University wrote an amazing five-page letter in Paul’s support. Here are a few excerpts:

“…I share with many of Paul’s acquaintances the opinion that he possesses the quality of leadership in highest degree of all the people we have known in any walk of life….

“Paul Olum is an exceptional man. He is articulate, forthright, honest, always stating what he believes in the most cogent terms. People as forceful as Paul are often undemocratic as leaders, and frequently they do not respond to the views of others. To the contrary, Paul’s forcefulness in dealing with the higher administration as chairman was matched by his insistence on having all major issues discussed thoroughly and decided upon by the senior faculty, and by his continual consultation with others and his ability to change his views in response to a reasonable argument….

“…The Senate (comprised of students, faculty, staff, and administration) elected Paul as its member of the Board of Trustees, despite his warning the students that he disagreed with the view many of them hold of the University as primarily an instrument of social reform and service, where students should have a vote equal to the faculty’s in almost all matters. He told them what they had seen from experience: that he listens well and responds fairly to all interested parties, but that this does not mean the students should decide what courses should be given and what faculty should be hired or fired. He also emphasized his strong commitment to the traditional idea of the University as, first of all, a place where scholars and scientists advance and preserve knowledge, and teach it; the students had the wisdom to see in Paul the characteristics I mentioned earlier, and to choose such a forceful and reasonable man rather than a lesser one whose ideas about changing the University might be closer to theirs. He has been reelected as trustee by them.”

The qualities of leadership, honesty, courage, and sound judgment so forcefully described in Professor Kiefer’s letter became the hallmark of Paul’s service on our campus and later at the University of Oregon.

Paul Olum was born August 16, 1918, in Binghamton, New York. His father was a Jewish businessman who had fled Russia at the age of nine to escape persecution. Paul’s fascination with mathematics at an early age grew into excellent performance, as he graduated summa cum laude from Harvard University in 1940. In 1942 he married Vivian Goldstein, completed an MA in physics at Princeton University, and joined the scientific staff of the Manhattan Project. During his time at Los Alamos, Paul’s social conscience led him to raise questions among his colleagues regarding the implications of the bomb, and after its use against Japan, he became a lifelong advocate for peace and for proper control of nuclear technology.
He returned to Harvard after the war to complete his PhD in Mathematics in 1947 as a student of Hassler Whitney. Following a postdoctoral year at the Institute for Advanced Study, he joined the faculty of Cornell University in 1949. Over the next 25 years at Cornell, Paul rose to the rank of professor, served in various administrative roles, and spent time as a visiting faculty member at the University of Paris, Hebrew University, Stanford University, and the University of Washington, and as a member of the Institute for Advanced Study.

Paul and Vivian had three children: Judith Ann, Joyce Margaret, and Kenneth Daniel. During their years in Ithaca, Vivian earned a PhD in psychology from Cornell and served as an adjunct faculty member while maintaining a private practice in clinical psychology.

In 1974 Paul was named professor of mathematics and dean of the College of Natural Sciences at The University of Texas at Austin. Those were turbulent years, as President Stephen Spurr, who had hired Paul, was removed by the Board of Regents in fall 1974, and replaced by Lorene Rogers. Through those difficult times Paul never wavered in his support for faculty governance and intellectual integrity. Under his leadership, the college added a number of faculty who are among the strongest in their departments, including chair holders Cameron Gordon (mathematics), Beryl Simpson (integrative biology), Simon Lam (computer sciences), and Clark Wilson (geophysics), as well as Bruce Palka, the 2001-2002 chair of the Faculty Council.

It is rare that a dean continues to teach, but Paul taught a graduate algebraic topology course in 1975. A meeting to plan that semester included an exchange that sheds light on Paul’s values. When the person chairing the meeting expressed concern that we not offer too many courses for fear that some would not meet the minimum enrollment required, Paul said we should offer whatever courses the students need and just inform the dean (himself) that we need the courses anyway.

Another exchange that shows his nature occurred when John Dollard and Arno Bohm asked if he could help fund a joint seminar in mathematical physics. When he said he was short on discretionary funds, Arno pointed out that everybody talks about the value of interdisciplinary work, but nobody has funds for it. After a moment, Paul picked up the phone and called the provost. He began the conversation by saying, “You know, everybody talks about the value of interdisciplinary work, but….“ The provost found funds to support the seminar.

Paul’s brief stay on our campus ended in 1976 when he was named provost at the University of Oregon. Through their dark days of economic recession and budget cuts, he charted a path to success, serving as president from 1980 to 1989. Paul devoted his energy to strengthening the physical, intellectual, and moral foundation of the institution. As president he established 20 new research institutes and academic programs, built a new science complex—“the most significant construction program in the university’s history”—and helped develop the Riverfront Research Park, while staunchly supporting the fight against apartheid in South Africa. He died on January 19, 2001. In his eulogy in Eugene, Paul’s friend and colleague Theodore Palmer, said:

“…Most of all he was a leader of the University of Oregon, when budget problems threatened to destroy the still recent advances in quality. Let me mention one of many incidents I recall. Paul had to tell the University Assembly that, for a third year in a row, we would have no pay raises. Everyone in the room needed a raise, whether it was just because of inflation, or a newly-purchased house or a new baby or a child going to college. But Paul told us we were engaged in noble work—enhancing and passing on the fruits of civilization and culture to the next generation. He convinced us that we were all in this together. Instead of killing the messenger of bad news, we swallowed our disappointment and gave him an enthusiastic standing ovation. The budget crisis left the University intact in academic structure, in our library, and in our morale due to Paul’s supreme gift for leadership."

As a mathematician Paul was widely respected for his research in algebraic topology. Although his list of publications is not long, his contributions were significant, particularly in the difficult area of obstruction theory, and they were published in the most prestigious journals. Among his close friends was Nobel laureate Richard Feynman, who wrote in his autobiography of Paul’s intelligence. In one anecdote, Feynman told of an experience at Los Alamos when he had claimed to be able to take any problem that could be stated in ten seconds and find an answer to within ten percent in no more than sixty seconds. When this challenge was made to Paul, he quickly responded, “Find the tangent of 10 to the 100th.” Feynman was stumped. While Paul’s brilliance was matched by others, it is indeed rare to find such a combination of intelligence, integrity, respect for others, and a supreme gift for leadership.
This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors James W. Vick (chair), John Dollard, and Gary Hamrick, and Professor Emeritus Leonard Gillman.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Natural Sciences, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on August 26, 2002. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.