June 12, 2015

Tom Wolff helped shape the MSU College of Engineering of today

After 17 years as the associate dean for engineering undergraduate studies, and 29 years at Michigan State University, Tom Wolff thought the arrival of Summer 2015 would be the welcome end of a good and satisfying ride, and a year’s transition of “other duties.”

Sometimes life is full of surprises.

Wolff will step down as the college’s associate dean for undergraduate studies at the end of June only to step in as an interim department chair for a year in the College of Engineering.

Wolff and Neeraj Buch, chair and professor of the MSU Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, are changing places.

For Buch, the appointment as associate dean for engineering undergraduate studies is a new, full-time job.

Wolff assumes the role of interim chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering on July 1. He will spend his one-year consultancy leading the department. Then, Wolff will retire from MSU in August 2016.

Whether associate dean or interim chair, Wolff’s educational philosophy toward students has always given him a solid foundation.

“We’re here to work together and we’re here to work for students,” he said during his last UGS staff meeting in May.

“Much has changed in 17 years,” Wolff said. “We started with about 16 employees directly in Undergraduate Studies (UGS), and now we have more than 40 regular employees with mostly 100 percent appointments.”

Wolff said he is proud that during his leadership tenure, the UGS specialist staff produced 10 PhDs, three assistant deans, and one department chair. The college also:

• changed the Engineering Arts program to Applied Engineering Sciences and moved it under the associate dean,
• added the Education Abroad Office,
• founded the Aggie McCann endowment providing support for varied undergraduate co-curricular activities,
• enacted the Admit When Ready enrollment program,
• added a Recruiting and Outreach Office,
• launched The Center for Spartan Engineering,
• enhanced Engineering Week activities,
• developed the nationally admired Cornerstone and Residential Experience (CoRe) program,
• expanded Design Day into a college-wide academic showcase,
• established the Women in Engineering program, and
• helped direct the explosion of enrollment (student numbers increased by 75 percent) in the past six years.

After reading the long list at his last staff meeting, Wolff was quick to say, “We did that, not me.”

Leo Kempel, dean of the College of Engineering, said Wolff’s service to his college, and to students, has been profound and has had exceptional impact through the years.

“He leadership of our undergraduate program for over 17 years has led to steady improvements in student learning and in strengthening programs and student experiences at Michigan State University,” Kempel said.

“He continues that dedication in his last year on the active faculty as interim chairperson of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. In that role, he will shepherd the department's preparation for the 2016 ABET accreditation visit and in the search for a new department chairperson. We thank him for this service.”

Wolff's own education started at St. Louis Community College in Missouri. He completed civil engineering degrees at the University of Missouri – Rolla (BS), Oklahoma State University (MS), and Purdue University (PhD). Then came a 15-year career as a geotechnical engineer with the St. Louis District Corps of Engineers, where he worked on the design of dams, levees, and other water projects in Missouri, Illinois and Louisiana.

He came to MSU in 1986 to join the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering faculty. Then, in 1998, acting dean George Van Dusen asked him to serve as associate dean for two years. He has continued teaching civil engineering courses throughout his tenure.

“I learned early on that the role of the associate dean was to interpret policy or seek exceptions,” Wolff said. “My job was to help determine what is in the best interest of the student and the university. Students aren’t always right, but they are not always wrong either.

“If every situation was clear, we wouldn’t need associate deans,” he added. “Our common goal is always the success of the student.”

A legacy for supporting student activities

As Wolff leaves UGS, a portion of his legacy will be the Thomas F. Wolff College of Engineering Undergraduate Student Activities Endowed Fund. The Wolff Fund is a new chapter of support for undergraduate student activities in the College of Engineering, and one that builds on the heritage created on behalf of Aggie McCann.

McCann served as the secretary to the dean for 45 years, from 1917 to 1962. Her impact on engineering students was such a legend that her former students, and many friends, created an endowment in her name. The Aggie McCann Fund helps undergraduates achieve their co-curricular goals with financial support that varies from travel requests to attending professional conferences to the supplies needed to complete a team project.

As the number of alumni who still remember McCann’s contributions dwindle, Wolff and his wife, Kathleen, established the Wolff Fund through an initial gift to help ensure support for student activities remains available in the college.

“My own travel to conferences as a college student left a lasting impression on how such experiences can foster leadership,” Wolff explained. “It is an excellent way to show we are here for the students,” he added.

For more information on supporting the Wolff Fund, please call the College of Engineering Office of Development at (517) 355-8339 or e-mail at egrdevel@egr.msu.edu.