

For Carl Cohen, On his Retirement 2017

The Residential College Community is grateful to Professor Carl Cohen as one of the founders of this educational experiment. His presence among us exemplifies the purpose of undergraduate education. Three adjectives come to mind: rigorous, principled, and gracious.

Among his courses, Logic and Language was a central component of the Residential College curriculum from the beginning. A curriculum rich in content requires instruction in the analytic techniques that enable students to discover, to question, to dismantle, and sometimes to admire that content.

His First Year Seminar faithfully and consistently proclaimed that effective writing must be grounded in lively encounters with challenging texts. Classic philosophical essays are every bit as necessary as contemporary statements. The latter must be situated in creative dialogue with the former not simply to provide a passive historical background, but also to insist upon the energizing effect of debate conducted across the space of temporal difference.

Carl is fiercely principled, and does not yield to adversaries equally fierce. Yet my experience has confirmed that his vigorous style communicates respect for his opponent. His positions do not harden into coercive ideologies, impervious to the world. He is unfailingly gracious to his interlocutors. Learning does not necessarily entail agreement; agreement does not entail conformity. What emerges from the intellectual encounter with Carl is that most mysterious, elusive, and treasured of human aspirations: freedom: the goal of all educational practice.

Cindy Sowers