Allan Smith Reflects on University Administration

Throughout a 35-year academic career at The University of Michigan, Allan F. Smith has learned to accept challenges gracefully—as Law School dean, the U-M's vice-president for academic affairs, interim U-M president, and law professor.

Now, his latest challenge is retirement. This past fall term, Smith taught his last class in property law at the Law School, having reached the retirement age of 70. After a winter vacation in Florida, he plans to return to Ann Arbor. He is due to receive the formal "emeritus" status in May and is considering an offer from the Law School to teach a post-retirement seminar starting next fall.

Looking back at accomplishments during his career, Smith views the equanimity with which the U-M administration dealt with periods of student turbulence in the 1960s and 1970s, while he was vice-president for academic affairs, as a significant achievement. "As a group, I feel administrators of the University did a better job of keeping control over all situations—in avoiding destruction and keeping the place from shutting down—than any other major institution in the country," said Smith in a recent interview. "Of course, much of the credit must go to Robben Fleming," who was President of the University at that time.

Among other accomplishments which were gratifying to him during his administrative career, Smith lists the "nurturing" of a newly created U-M Center for Continuing Education for Women, creation of the Institute for the Study of Mental Retardation and Related Disabilities, development of U-M area centers during 1965-1974 under Ford Foundation and governmental grants, and finally successful efforts while he was interim president to obtain a "Certificate of Need" for the U-M's Replacement Hospital Project which is now under way. He said he also relishes his work with Eugene and Sadye Power on the performing arts building for the University.

Today, however, the focus of administrative attention has shifted to the economic sphere, as the U-M—among other higher education institutions—must find ways to cut costs and, in some cases, reduce programs without compromising on quality. "The problems the University faces now, in terms of money, are of a dimension I never had to experience," Smith said.

"I've never been an advocate of size for its own sake. On the contrary, I think the process we've followed for 30 years of controlling growth through individual school or college decisions of what the size should be is the best procedure to follow. I'm not at all sure we didn't get overextended, but I still think those schools and colleges can best determine what their capacities are, and what the demand for their product is."

Smith maintains that, despite financial problems, growth of units should not be slowed in areas where there is great societal need. For example, "the School of Business Administration faces great demand for their services and product, and I see no reason why they shouldn't expand," noted Smith.

"In the literary college, neither the undergraduate program nor the graduate program should necessarily get much smaller. Since tuition revenue today represents some 38 percent of the University's general fund budget, the program would have to be reduced considerably to realize any budgetary benefits."

Smith said a major difficulty for U-M administrators, especially on budget matters, is having to be accountable to many constituencies. President Shapiro and the vice-president for academic affairs, B. E. Frye, "have a tough job because they have to let Lansing and our alumni know that the University's fiscal problems are very real and that we do risk declining quality. At the same time, they have to find a way to let the internal units know that all is not lost and that this is still a very strong institution."

Smith said he felt University-wide budget pressures have not necessarily meant greater centralization of University governance. "I have very little sympathy with the notion that we have suddenly become a highly centralized institution. Yet he said he believes certain matters, such as program discontinuance, can best be decided "by people who are paid to think at a University level."

A native of Nebraska, Smith graduated in 1933 from Nebraska State Teachers College and planned to become a high school English teacher. But because of limited economic opportunities in teaching at that time, he took a job as a legal stenographer for three years, and then went on to receive a law degree from the University of Nebraska in 1940.

He came to the U-M in 1940 to pursue advanced law degrees. Gov.
government and military service intervened, and he returned to the U-M in 1946, joining the law faculty as lecturer. An authority on the law of property, Professor Smith has made the field accessible in his perennially popular first-year course.

University Regent Thomas Roach is one of Smith’s former students in the course, as are the parents of several students who were fortunate enough to be in Smith’s final Property class this fall. All Smith’s students seem to agree that he was challenging yet fair and engaging, revealing the interest and importance of Property Law.

Professor Smith became a full professor in 1953, then Dean of the Law School. As Dean, Smith played a critical role. Although Michigan had already been a great law school for many years, a 1959 evaluation expressed concern about the homogeneity of the faculty which had resulted from the retirement of several distinguished scholars. Taking over the deanship in 1960, Smith moved to diversify the curriculum and the faculty, while preserving the traditional high standards of the institution. According to current dean Terrance Sandalow, Smith’s deanship marked “the beginning of the modern history of the Law School”; during it “a large number of exceedingly able faculty members,” were hired, “many of whom have in the years since become important members of the faculty and major figures in the law.” At the same time that Smith worked to broaden the intellectual activities of the School, he also preserved the spirit of collegiality which characterizes the Michigan faculty.

He left the deanship to become vice-president for academic affairs in 1965, guiding academic programs for the University for nine years. In 1979 he was asked by the Regents to serve as interim president of the University until a successor was named for retiring President Robben Fleming.

In December 1980, upon completion of his presidency, Smith was awarded an honorary doctor of laws degree by the Regents. The citation noted in part: “Rarely has a single person had such a telling impact on every facet of the University’s mission. Allan Smith is at once author, scholar, teacher, educational leader and spokesman. The Regents thus recognize this remarkably talented and dedicated friend.”

by Harley Schwadron

Economics Building
Destroyed by Fire

On Christmas Eve a fire, which officials say was set by an arsonist, destroyed the University of Michigan Economics Building. Constructed in various stages, the building was begun in the 1840s. It was the oldest classroom building still in use on the University campus.

The Law School sponsors a joint program in Law and Economics, and several law professors hold joint appointments in Economics, maintaining offices there as well as in the Law Quadrangle. Many of them lost valuable private libraries and irreplaceable research materials in the fire. Among those who sustained serious losses was Law School faculty member William James Adams. His records and results of a year spent doing research in France were collected in a file cabinet that was in the most heavily burned section of the building. All papers not destroyed by flames have been subjected to a freeze-drying process that minimizes water damage resulting from the fire-fighting efforts.