White raises bar, competition for Michigan Society of Fellows

James Boyd White

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To measure James Boyd White's impact during 18 years as chair of the Michigan Society of Fellows in the Horace H. Rackham Graduate School, consider that now 400 people typically compete each year for four available fellowships.

"The quality of our program is determined by the quality of those who apply to join it," says White, the L. Hart Wright Collegiate Professor of Law, professor of English language and literature, and adjunct professor of classical studies in LSA [the U-M's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts].

"It has been a great joy for me to be part of the lives of these incredibly talented young people. I have gotten to know faculty from many fields, and have enjoyed lots of serious and sustained intellectual conversation with them; it has been just wonderful," says White, who January 1 handed off the chair position to Professor Donald S. Lopez Jr., the Arthur E. Link Distinguished University Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures in LSA.

"Under the leadership of James Boyd White, the society has played a valuable and distinctive role in the intellectual life of the University," says Janet A. Weiss, dean of the Rackham Graduate School and vice provost for academic affairs-graduate studies. "Current and former Fellows are deeply appreciative of Professor White's devotion to the Michigan Society of Fellows; all of the faculty have benefited from the many ways the society has enlivened the quality of intellectual discourse at the University."

The Michigan Society of Fellows was established in 1970 with endowment grants from the Ford Foundation and the Horace H. and Mary Rackham Funds. The most distinctive aspect of the society is a multidisciplinary emphasis, which gives the Fellows an opportunity to interact across disciplines and to expand their horizons and knowledge.

White initiated interactions among the Fellows by requiring monthly meetings to discuss their work, and there have been some memorable pairings—one of them current.

"Two of our first-year Fellows are working on analogous projects," White explains. "One is studying music in England after World War II and asking how it affected the restoration of national identity—and at the same time there is a fellow studying the architectural history of post-World War II monuments created in Japan with much the same purpose. They are a natural pair."

While their own scholarship is enriched, Fellows also enrich the University through teaching. Each year the Society selects four outstanding applicants for appointment to three-year fellowships in the arts and humanities, in the social, physical, and life sciences, and in the professional schools. The newly appointed postdoctoral Fellows join a unique interdisciplinary community composed of their peers, as well as senior fellows.

Fellows are appointed as assistant professors in appropriate departments and are expected to be in residence during the academic years of the fellowship to teach for the equivalent of one academic year; to participate in the informal intellectual life of the society; and to devote time to their independent research.

"It provides them a terrific boost," White continues. "They'd normally begin their careers in jobs where it can be difficult to continue sustained research. Fellows teach in their department one year and the other two are entirely free for research. It gives them a chance to develop their ideas more fully."

White is an alumnus of Amherst College, Harvard Law School, and Harvard Graduate School, where he obtained a master's degree in English. After graduation from law school, he spent a year as a Sheldon Fellow in Europe and then practiced law in Boston for two years.

He began his teaching career at the University of Colorado Law School, then moved in the mid-1970s to the University of Chicago, where he was a professor in the law school, the college, and the Committee on the Ancient Mediterranean World. He served as a governor of the Chicago Council of Lawyers and is a member of the American Law Institute and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 1997-98 was a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar.

—Kevin Brown, The University Record