Marvin Niehuss Retires After 50 Years at U-M

Editor's Note: Prof. Marvin L. Niehuss' association with the U-M as a student, law professor, and University administrator has spanned a half-century. The following is an account of his contributions as a U-M "career man."

When Marvin L. Niehuss entered The University of Michigan as a freshman in 1920, he paid a scant $105 per year in out-of-state tuition. At that time, enrollment at the Ann Arbor campus was only 8,000, and the University's annual appropriation from the state was automatically calculated as a fixed percentage of the state's real estate taxes.

Today all that has changed. Now the University submits a detailed annual budget request to the state and awaits legislative approval. Graduate and undergraduate enrollment, which swelled immediately after World War II and again during the 1960's, is now approaching 35,000 for the Ann Arbor campus. And tuition fees have increased steadily over the years.

Niehuss recalls his early days at the University with fondness. And he has equally pleasant memories of the University over the past five decades, when it weathered the challenges of financial uncertainty and unprecedented growth.

Niehuss spent his entire career at the U-M, from his student days through his service as a law professor and the U-M's executive vice-president. On his retirement in June, the U-M Regents, in granting him the title of professor emeritus of law, noted that "few men in the history of the University have come to know it so well, or have done more to help shape its destiny."

Indeed, during his 23 years as a U-M administrator, Niehuss was the man responsible for the University's achieving sufficient levels of financial support in the face of such trying circumstances as World War II, the post-war enrollment bulges, and the recession of the late 1950's.

One theme that Niehuss has continued to stress over the years is the importance of maintaining the high quality of education at the U-M. "I've often said this in the past, and I think it is just as true today: It took the people of Michigan over 100 years to build a public institution that is virtually unrivaled in the nation, and it is an asset we don't have the right to waste," the U-M educator insists.

And although it has become fashionable today to debunk our social institutions, Niehuss believes that many Michigan residents still take pride in the U-M as "an institution where their kids can get an education equal to or better than anywhere else in the world."

The educator also offers a traditional point of view in asserting that "a strong faculty and good libraries are the essential ingredients of an outstanding university." "The U-M has done well in these areas over the years," he adds. "Looking to the future, I would say we are in as good a position as any other university in maintaining our standards of excellence."

A native of Louisville, Ky., Niehuss worked his way through undergraduate school and received a bachelor's degree in economics from the U-M in 1925, with membership in Phi Beta Kappa. He then taught in the U-M economics department and the School of Business Administration while pursuing his law degree, which he received in 1930.

Niehuss has been associated with the University ever since, except for two years when he practiced law in Chicago. He joined the law faculty in 1933, and nine years later, during World War II, was asked to coordinate the Emergency Training Program and other government contracts for the University.

Niehuss' success in this task helped ease the U-M through a difficult World War II period. In the early part of the war the U-M came under fire for supposedly not doing enough for the war effort, and President Alexander Ruthven was criticized for advising students to continue their education instead of enlisting in the military.

Upon joining the administration, Niehuss discovered that about a third of the University's budget was already involved in work for the government. After informing President Ruthven of this, Niehuss accompanied the U-M president to Lansing to tell the story to the legislature. The legislators were impressed, and criticism of the University eased. And in this way, Niehuss began his career in legislative relations.

In 1944 Niehuss was asked by President Ruthven to take the new position of vice-president for University relations, which would include responsibility for legislative relations. He retained the post until 1951 when, under President Harlan Hatcher, Niehuss became vice-president and dean of faculties, a post that involved legislative relations in addition to responsibility for academic affairs of the University.

Finally, in 1962, Niehuss became executive vice-president and retained responsibility for legislative relations, while Roger Heyns (now president of the American Council on Education) assumed the post of vice-president for academic affairs.

Throughout his administrative career, Niehuss has been known for his ability to win the respect of both faculty and legislators. As one commentator pointed out earlier:

"Since cynicism rather than reverence usually marks the attitudes of faculty and lawmakers toward college administrators, it is high praise when a literary college professor says: 'Niehuss is probably the clearest thinker and the straightest talker on that side of the street.'

That remark was made following the economic recession of the late 1950's when the University faced serious financial problems. But Niehuss is proud of the fact that, despite financial uncertainties, few faculty members left the U-M. And after the recession had eased, he notes, substantial salary increases were put into effect.

Niehuss retired from his administrative duties in 1968 and resumed teaching at the Law School, where he has specialized in real estate law.

Now, at age 70, he has retired from the law faculty, thus ending an active association with the University that spanned a half-century.

Although his future plans are indefinite, Niehuss says he hopes to remain in Ann Arbor and pursue long-overdue personal projects. With characteristic dedication to the U-M, he notes that one of his immediate projects will be the preparation of papers and documents relating to the University's past for donation to the Michigan Historical Collections.