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Celebrating the legacy of Walter Capps

The lessons and impacts of Walter Capps — the revered UC Santa Barbara religious studies professor turned national leader — remain touchstones for many of his former students and academic and political contemporaries. For a closer look at that legacy, a two-day event on campus will bring together the people who knew him best and many of those he influenced.

"Celebrating the Legacy of Walter H. Capps: Professor, Humanist, Public Servant," takes place Friday, Nov. 10 at the McCune Conference Room in the Humanities & Social Sciences Building, and on Saturday, Nov. 11 at Campbell Hall. Hosted by the Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life, the event is free and open to the public and will be livestreamed on the center's YouTube channel. In-person attendees are encouraged to RSVP.

Panel discussions on Nov. 10 will cover the value of the humanities in today's society and Capps's contributions to the study of religion, among other topics. On Nov. 11, panelists will look back on the impact of Capps's famous course on the Vietnam War, his courses on ethics, his 1996 congressional campaign and career in politics and the value of public service. Many of his former students and colleagues are expected to speak during the conference. The full program is available here.

Speakers and panelists include former U.S. senator and Nebraska governor Bob Kerrey, former U.S. Representative Lois Capps, Santa Barbara County Supervisor Laura Capps and UCSB Chancellor Henry Yang, among many scheduled scholars, politicians and former colleagues and students.

Capps taught at UCSB for more than 30 years. Garnering national attention, his course on the historically unpopular Vietnam War, “Religion and the Impact of Vietnam,” proved cathartic for the veterans who appeared as guest speakers and impactful for the students exposed to their firsthand accounts of the war and its aftermath. More than 15,000 students took the course over 16 years.

Another popular Capps course, “Voices of the Stranger,” was based on the work of a Trappist monk. Capps designed its curriculum to teach about the struggles and successes of everyday people who had overcome seemingly insurmountable life obstacles, such as experiencing homelessness or battling severe disease.

Long before he first ran for elected office in the mid-1990s, Capps “was enchanted by politics,” said his daughter, Laura Capps. “He had such reverence for the history, and he was inspired by government for the right reasons. He was the opposite of cynical.”

Running as a Democrat in 1996, Walter Capps was elected to Congress to represent California’s Central Coast district, which had been previously held by Republicans for decades. During his campaign, Capps spoke to the abrasive politics common of the era and sought to mend divides and discover common ground on the issues.

“He resisted black or white, for or against, and really tried to approach politics from a bigger, more holistic point of view and ground his new life as a candidate and congressperson in history and intellectual thought,” Laura Capps said. “If he were still alive he’d still be looking for ways to ground political discussions in meaning and value. That’s something I try to do as well. When I think about what my dad would do, it often leads me to, ‘What are my own values?’ And it helps me to connect to others, even those with different perspectives.”

Walter Capps died suddenly of a heart attack on Oct. 28, 1997, after less than a year holding office. He was 63. His wife, Lois Capps, won the vacant seat and served from 1998–2017.

“This conference is really a reunion,” Laura Capps said. “And I’m really happy for my mom. This means a lot, for her especially.”

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About UC Santa Barbara

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