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Archival Project

10/21/17

Walking with History: James A. Graaskamp

I’m walking into the Wisconsin School of Business. It’s 9 a.m. on a Sunday, and the first thing that strikes me is how eerily quiet the place is. Business students have better places to be – probably in their beds, sleeping soundly, and I can’t blame them. And while I normally include myself among my fellow BBA students on Sundays, today I find myself on a specific mission, a higher cause per se: to trace the footprint that former professor James A. Graaskamp left on the University of Wisconsin’s campus. Now before I go too deep into this narrative, let me first lay out the framework of a man that not many people know about.

By all accounts, James “Jim” Graaskamp was an extraordinary person. As a professor and the department chair in Real Estate and Urban Land Development, he almost single-handedly brought UW’s program into national prominence and prestige. As an involved member of the UW community, he played a vital role in the formation of the McBurney Center and helped to make all of campus more accessible to people with disabilities. This archival project is meant to shed light on these achievements and the impact that Professor Graaskamp left behind.

Back in the School of Business, Graaskamp’s mark is both tangible and intangible. A quick elevator up to the 5th floor, signs posted alongside the walls direct me towards the James A. Graaskamp Center for Real Estate. Funded through donations made by the former students of Graaskamp, the center is a physical representation of his legacy and what he meant to his alumni. [[1]](#footnote-1) Ask anyone about Madison’s Business school and one of the first facts that gets mentioned is that its Real Estate program is number one in the nation. Ask any professor in the Real Estate Department and they’ll be quick to mention Graaskamp and how he was able to transform the curriculum into its current, interdisciplinary approach. The opportunity to work within the University Archives gives me access to the firsthand accounts of this transformation.

Take my word for it, James Graaskamp was a genius. The advancements that he made to the analytical and theory side of Real Estate are endless, and I choose to leave these contributions out of this paper as it is not the most interesting topic to read (and write) about. Instead, what I found the most compelling, was his ability to connect and engage with all of his students. He made real estate real, applicable, and perhaps most importantly, based around ethics, not greed. For example, he formed a course where he allowed a group of students to buy and redevelop a series of local homes. (Badger Herald, 1988) At the end of the semester, he and his students sold the house back to a family a low and affordable price. This hands-on approach to Real Estate forced students to apply what they learned in class to the real world, and was why his Real Estate program was able to advance into national prominence.

Graaskamp developed an extremely strict and rigorous curriculum around the belief that students wanted to be challenged. It even got to the point where people were calling his program the “West Point of real estate” and nicknaming Graaskamp as the “Chief” of the program. (Milwaukee Journal, 4/26/88) His coursework required students to do 8-10 hours of work each day. Ranging from a wide variety of business case studies, to tedious mathematical analysis, as one of his former student concisely put it, “if you were in his class, that came first and everything else came second.” (Penn, 1998) Graaskamp made a bet on his students, and not only was he right, but his students responded by becoming even more devoted to him and to the program.

Graaskamp, however, wasn’t your stereotypical strict and uncaring professor. He cared about the success of his students and was always able to talk. By making himself available to his students on a personal level, he was able to form connections that went past the classroom. Graaskamp was “an extra father,” he offered counseling, and even helped to pay for his student’s tuitions when they were in tight spots. In short, his students loved him. (Capital Times, 1988) Through these close relationships, he was able to share his passion for Real Estate and for people along with his students, thus forming a more engaged learning community.

I’m beginning part two of my three-part journey. I have it all mapped out in my head, the plan of attack. I’m going to the McBurney Resource Center. More specifically, I want to ask if I can see the Graaskamp Conference Room, and then see if the center has any archival papers or pictures that can help me with my research. I arrive at the Johnson street entrance, and big surprise, it’s closed. I guess I didn’t do all my research, as a simple google search would have told me the simple fact that the Center is closed on the weekend. Reluctantly, I sit back at a nearby bench, and pull out my phone – an email will have to do.

What is the McBurney Center, and how is James Graaskamp linked to its history? Let’s start by answering the first part of the question. The McBurney Center, which opened its doors in 1977, was one of the first campus centers to offer resources and accommodations to college students with disabilities. Lead by the Dean of Students Paul Ginsberg and Assistant Dean Blair Matthews, the center worked in conjunction with professors and campus officials to make the university more accessible. There was, however, a major roadblock facing the McBurney Center. I was able to listen to an interview done with Blair Matthews, who talked in great deal about the lack of funding that the center received. Pre-Americans with Disabilities Act, which was the federal act that began to address the accessibility and discrimination issues that students with disabilities faced, Matthews says that they only had a budget of about $10,000. Enter James Graaskamp into the equation.

Graaskamp was instrumental in the founding of the McBurney Center, and also served as one of its most vocal advocates in support of accessibility. (McBurney Budget Report, 1977) When the center needed initial funding, Graaskamp went to the family of Mike McBurney and was able to secure the seed money. [[2]](#footnote-2) When the staff and student volunteers needed a location to be based out of, Graaskamp worked with the Dean of the Business School to find a base within the School of Business. When the University needed someone to chair its Committee for Disabled Persons on Campus, Graaskamp volunteered and took the role in stride. I think it’s safe to say that without Graaskamp, the McBurney Center would have struggled to become the program that it is today.

Graaskamp’s involvement, however, goes much further than an early facilitator. In his eyes, the resource center represented “an interface point between disabled students and the administration – a clearing-house for concerns and policies.” (Wolff, 1978) In other words, it was to facilitate communication between an under-represented population of students and the University, and then work to bridge the gaps and differences that were brought up. Graaskamp strived to see that all students with disabilities could live up to their true potential – a potential that wasn’t defined by social norms or stigmas – and did everything in his power to eliminate any potential obstacles that could limit them. These obstacles, whether they were small or big (in scope), literal or figurative, were all addressed in the countless number of memos sent between him and the Chancellor.[[3]](#footnote-3) Being a professor in Real Estate, a lot of the problems that he focused on dealt with physical access – a street or building with a missing ramp, a lack of handicapped seating/parking, or a telephone booth that was too tall. (Memo to Ted Crabb, 1979) With that being said, I choose to end this section with a particular passage from a memo relating to a 504 program offered on campus. Its introduction not only perfectly represents the McBurney Center, but also personifies James Graaskamp’s character:

As introduction it should be noted that the intent of 504 is to permit the disabled students to probe and experiment in the various academic disciplines to discover what they can do with self-satisfaction, consistent with University quality of expectation, and the goal of normalizing participation within the flow of the course and of classmates. The faculty must be taught not to prejudge human capacity, to adapt, to innovate, and to persevere. (Memo, May 9, 1979)

I’m on my bike now, heading towards the finale of my fictional, Graaskamp tour around Madison. For a few minutes, I imagine this fictional tour service, dedicated to the life of James Graaskamp, following my current path and leading a group of interested students along in the journey, honoring the legacy of the bigger than life character. Quickly, I dismiss that idea as nonsense – Graaskamp will have to settle for me.

At this ending point in my journey, I finally feel it both necessary and appropriate to discuss Graaskamp’s personal disability. I have withheld this information so far, not as if it was this deep and dark secret of his and one that he was ashamed of, rather on the contrary, I believe that this is what he would have wanted. To tell people about his accomplishments, his passions, who he was, first, and then let them in on what he called his “materials handling problem.” (Milwaukee Journal, 4/24/88)

In high school, at a towering 6 ft. 6 in. and weighing in around 250 lbs., Graaskamp was a star football player, and was planning to play football for Harvard on scholarship. When he was 17, however, he was struck with polio, leaving him confined to a wheelchair with only slight ability to move his hands. He was a quadriplegic, but only saw it as just another obstacle in his life that he was ready to overcome. He was known to dismiss his disability as a handicap, and in his eyes, since “quadriplegics live a day at a time because they could die at any time,” that’s how he lived his life, “one day at a time” and to the fullest. (Daily Cardinal, 1998) A prime example of this was his newfound interest in fishing towards the end of his life. Using a specially designed rod that allowed him to reel the line in with his teeth, he became an avid fisherman. Graaskamp was even known to serve a good portion of what he caught to his real estate students at an annual fall dinner that he hosted. (UW Madison Release Statement)

Graaskamp lead through example, using his disability along with his accomplishments to inspire and to challenge the people around him. Graaskamp didn’t shy behind his disability either. According to one of his former students (and also one of my favorite anecdotes), whenever anyone would say that their workload was unfair, “he’d look you right in the eye and say, ‘life’s a bitch, isn’t it?’ [and] you’d look at him and his situation and say, ‘whoa, I’ve got a losing argument here.’” (Penn, 1998) Although Graaskamp was indeed extremely physically handicapped, he never let this fact define or limit his life, and was able to live his life to the fullest.

Here I am, at my final stop: The James A. Graaskamp Park.[[4]](#footnote-4) It’s a small park, and on a warm, sunny morning, I’m surprised to find that I’m one of the only people here. There are slides and ramps naturally built along small hills and inclines, and I get the impression that it’s the neighborhood’s secret park. Developed following the death of Graaskamp by a mom in the neighborhood with a paraplegic son, it is Wisconsin’s first, fully accessible public playground.

After a short walk around, I find myself back at the front, where there is a bronze plaque commemorating the man that I have been devoted to studying for the past month. The park, as the name suggest, is dedicated to James A. Graaskamp – a physical representation of the two areas he cared about the most: accessibility and urban land development. I begin to picture Graaskamp, a known nature admirer, enjoying himself here, but then stop – that would be way too cheesy of an ending.

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Writer’s Memo

When I first started to think about how I wanted to write this paper, I came to a complete blank. To me, there was so many different directions that I could take with describing the impact and history of James Graaskamp that I was essentially lost. What I did – what ended up making a significant part of my paper/theme – was walk around campus and to the buildings and the park that Graaskamp was a part of. I decided to use this personal, narrative approach and apply it to this paper. This helped make this paper more interesting to write, as I could directly insert my own voice into the paper.

During the rough draft stage, a criticism of my paper that was brought up in both the peer review and through your comments was that I wasn’t engaging enough with archival material. This was only because the section of the paper that was written was about his contribution to the Real Estate program. Most of my materials that I had about this section was through newspaper clips. Compared to the latter sections, which talk about the McBurney Center and his disability, I was able to gather much more personal information, often written by Graaskamp himself or through student/co-worker testimonials.

If I had more time, I would have done much more research on the McBurney Center. After just going through one of the boxes in the Archives, I became very interested in how the center was used as a form of sponsorship that connected the students with disabilities and the rest of campus. In terms of future writing goals, I want to continue to improve my ability to smoothly link the text within the paragraph, the argument, and the rest of my paper. Thanks for taking the time to read my project.

1. As a side note, these former alumni also began an endowment fund, in honor of the late Graaskamp, that funds the salary for the head of the Real Estate Department. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mike McBurney, an archival research project for another day, was a former UW Madison Law School Graduate and was also elected Assistant District Attorney. Paralyzed at age of 16 due to a car accident, he had recently passed away, and his family made the first to the resource center in his honor. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One of my favorite parts during this section of archival research was having the chance to read these animated exchanges between Graaskamp and other members of the University. At times he had a very sarcastic attitude which came across in his writing, especially when he felt that his formal requests were being ignored. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The park is located at 1953 E. Mifflin St., east of downtown Madison for those interested in seeing the place for themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)