

## Vince Grassi Memorial Resolution at the Lehigh University Senate meeting, September 4, 2020

It is with great sadness that I read this memorial resolution for Dr. Vince Grassi, Professor of Practice in the Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering who passed away from esophageal cancer on May 3, 2020 in the Villages in Florida. He was 64 years old.

I first met Vince Grassi during a visit to Lehigh in April 1998 when I gave a seminar in the control center, just before I started as an Assistant Professor in the department.

At that time, Vince was managing a technical group at Air Products. I remember having a very stimulating discussion and big debate after my seminar about which control algorithm is better – a model-based optimal predictive controller or a conventional PID controller. That argument continued for many years after that in my interactions with him. Since that initial meeting, I continued to interact with Vince as I begin my academic career as a young faculty member, discussing technical issues and topics with Vince, debating with him which control and automation method is the best in an industrial context.

But also interestingly, I remember discussing with Vince industrial control education. In subsequent years, Vince invited me to participate in a new initiative he had started at Air Products – that initiative was to prepare training and educational modules for teaching engineers advanced tools and techniques from control theory. It became clear to me that Vince was very interested in education even while he was still in industry. That was quite remarkable – one of his colleagues at Air Products once said about him “Vince was born with a piece of chalk in his hand”. Many years later, that core interest came to fruition for Vince when he started participating in our process design course as an Adjunct Professor while still working full time at Air Products. After his retirement from Air Products, we were very fortunate to attract Vince to our department and he joined us as a Professor of Practice in 2015. Over the last five years, our faculty had grown to recognize what a gifted teacher and mentor Vince Grassi was. He embraced new methods of pedagogy, took an active role in the KEEN initiative in the department and at the College level and he explored new tools for engineering education. Most importantly, he wanted to teach students the entrepreneurial skill sets for succeeding in their careers. His teaching contributions cut across all four years of Chemical Engineering education at Lehigh. He taught ENGR5 to freshmen, the Professional Development course to sophomores, Mass Transfer and Separation Process Principles in the junior year and Process Design in the senior year. He was particularly active in encouraging women chemical engineers to excel in their careers, providing encouragement during difficult courses, and suggesting promising career paths. He was recognized with two teaching awards at Lehigh – one at the University level – the Dorothy L. Stabler Award for Excellence in Teaching and at the College level – the Rossin College Faculty Experiential Learning Excellence Award, both in 2019.

In terms of his technical background – Vince received his BS in Chemical Engineering from U. of Rochester in 1978, and his MS and PhD degrees all in Chemical Engineering from Lehigh in 1985 and 1991 respectively, working with Prof. William Luyben in our department. He held various leadership positions at Air Products and Chemicals, Inc. in Allentown, Pa., from 1978 to 2013, including senior engineering manager of process modeling and control, director of global learning and knowledge management, and director of employee development, diversity and inclusion. Grassi served as an adjunct professor in Lehigh’s department of chemical and biomolecular engineering from 2008-2013, focused primarily on the senior capstone design project. Following his 2013 retirement from Air Products, he joined the Lehigh faculty full-time as a professor of practice in chemical engineering, where he continued to teach until his passing. Grassi held key positions in the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE). He served as chair and director of one of the divisions of AIChE, as a member of the Chemical Technology Operating Council, and as co-chair of the Annual Meeting of AIChE. Most recently, he served in 2014 as the executive programming board chair.

A virtual memorial was held for Vince on May 15 via ZOOM and was attended by approximately 100 people. Vince’s PhD dissertation advisor Prof William Luyben from our department had the following to say about him:

*“Lehigh lost a dedicated teacher, a congenial faculty colleague and innovative contributor in the several undergraduate courses, particularly the senior design course. I lost a son.”*

Another colleague, Dr. Jonas Baltrusaitis, who was a co-instructor with Vince in the senior capstone design project said the following:

*“His people skills were unrivaled ... He was undoubtedly the heart of the (capstone) design course. Students flocked to him and I was never even jealous or insecure about it. Vince was their lifeline, their mentor, their breath of fresh air at the time of uncertainty.”*

Perhaps the most touching remembrances were those shared by our graduating seniors from the Class of 2020. I quote a couple:

*“He was a very special professor in the way he taught us not only about chemical engineering principles but about life His desire to create well-rounded engineers, ready for both the intellectual rigor and social responsibility of chemical engineering industries was inspiring.”*

*“I’d like to thank Professor Grassi for all he has done for me and the entire chemical engineering program.”*

Vince leaves behind his wife Kimberly also a Lehigh alumnus chemical engineer and fellow engineer with him at Air Product daughter, Christine, and sister, Susan.

We have lost a truly gifted and passionate educator, a colleague and a friend.

A special video was put together by the Class of 2020 in memory of Vince. I will share only the first minute of it here for you to see.