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MSU prof was 'master teacher'

James Madison educator died after surgery at age 63

By Matthew Miller
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EAST LANSING - Douglas Hoekstra was one of the first professors at MSU's James Madison College.

He came on in 1969, at a time when the residential college for public and international affairs was still something of an educational experiment.

Hoekstra helped transform it into one of Michigan State University's most respected undergraduate programs.

"He infused the study of American politics, the American political tradition and especially the American presidency into the Madison curriculum, and he did that in a marvelous way," said Richard Zinman, a friend and colleague for 36 years.

"He was a master teacher who had a profound effect on generations of students."

Hoekstra, a professor of political theory and constitutional democracy, died Sunday of complications following knee surgery.

He was 63.

Encouraging thought

"He was the kind of professor who you liked to run into in the hall because he was very interested in your life and very interested in Michigan politics," said Adam Wright, a former student who's now an attorney in Boston.

He said Hoekstra taught him that "political theory is not just in books.

"Not every political philosophy major wants to know that much about politics," he said, "but he encouraged people to look at what's really happening."

Important role

Hoekstra's research focused primarily on the American presidency and on the role of character and values in the formation of effective presidents.

That role, he argued, was a vital one.

Services

- Services for Douglas Hoekstra will be held at 11 a.m. Friday at Okemos Presbyterian Church.
- A visitation will be held from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. today at the Gorsline-Runciman Funeral Home, 1730 E. Grand River Ave., East Lansing.

"He thought that democracy was important," said Ellen Hoekstra, his wife of 35 years, "that ideas were important, that words were important."

He thought his students were important, too, she said, and "it meant a lot to him that he had a positive influence on them."

She continued, "He was a brilliant man with a wonderful sense of humor, who deeply loved his family."

Leaving a legacy

Ellen Hoekstra said her husband "died too early" for her to have thought about his legacy.

But some part of that legacy is James Madison College itself, Dean Sherman Garnett said.

"When you look back, Doug and his colleagues really accomplished something," he said.

"This is a monument to their work."

Contact Matthew Miller at 377-1046 or mrmiller@lsj.com.

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