Resolution on the Death of Fred Rothbaum
Professor of Child Development
Arts, Sciences, & Engineering Meeting
May 16th, 2012

The Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development invites the Arts, Sciences and Engineering Faculty to join us in remembering our friend and colleague, Professor Fred Rothbaum, whose unexpected death on August 24th, 2011 saddened us all.

Fred graduated summa cum laude from University of Michigan in 1971, with a major in Mathematics. He then received an MA in Developmental and Personality Psychology from Yale University in 1974, and a PhD in Clinical and Developmental Psychology, also from Yale University in 1977. He arrived at Tufts in 1979, was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure in 1982, and then to Full Professor in 1995. Fred served as Chair of the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development from 1986-1989 and again from 2003-2006. Fred’s scholarship focused on parent-child and family relationships, goal orientation, and locus of control. He acquired an international reputation for his work on culture, attachment relationships and parenting. He taught courses on developmental crises, family dynamics, and social and personality development and he conducted a seminar in clinical-developmental psychology.

Fred was an engaging educator and intellectually curious researcher, always thoughtful and responsive to contemporary issues. With numerous publications to his name, Fred’s scholarship and research were wide-ranging, including problem behavior of children and anxiety and depression in youth. He explored the differences between parent-child relationships in the United States and Japan, as well as our perceptions of control and emotion regulation. As a natural offshoot of his work, in 2000 he established the Child & Family WebGuide: a vibrant site that provides well-tempered information to an ever-seeking base of parents and families. Fred frequently represented Tufts in the media and developed strategies for bridging the gap between the media and academe.

As a theorist and researcher, Fred’s approach was unconventional, even iconoclastic. He loved to delve into widely accepted ideas in the field and turn them on their head. His style was to latch onto a paradox, master all the relevant theory and research, bring his own original insight to the topic, and write a major article that reshaped conventional wisdom. In the 1980s, Fred focused on the fact that extensive evidence showed how strongly people value control and how reluctant they are to give it up, but that other extensive evidence (e.g., from research on helplessness and locus of control) showed an apparent readiness to relinquish control. To unravel this apparent paradox, Fred and his colleagues drew a distinction between primary control, changing the world to fit our wishes, and secondary control, changing ourselves to fit the world and thus control its impact upon us. This distinction proved to have enormous relevance to cultural psychology, clinical psychology, health psychology, organizational psychology, and developmental psychology, including the study of lifespan development and
aging. The two original articles alone have generated more than a thousand citations—not to mention the enormous array of subsequent studies, reviews, and published debates on primary and secondary control—and the concepts have been the centerpiece of distinguished careers in our field. The primary-secondary control model is a centerpiece of Fred’s intellectual legacy.

Fred also served as director of the graduate program for several years. He was an active and engaged member of the faculty and co-chair of the Arts, Sciences, and Engineering Executive Committee during 2010-2011. But it is for his personal qualities that we are remembering Fred today: he was a deeply caring and devoted mentor, an empathetic listener, and was dedicated to his communities at Tufts. Fred brought warmth and insight to whatever task lay before him. The Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development has experienced a great loss.

We ask that this resolution be included in the minutes of the faculty of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, and that a copy be sent to his wife, Vickie Rothbaum, and his sons, Abe and Max.