Resolution on the Retirement of David Sloane,  
Associate Professor of Russian  
May 18, 2011

On behalf of the Department of German, Russian, Asian Languages and Literatures and of the university as a whole, it is my privilege to enter a resolution on the retirement of Professor David Sloane. It is difficult to capture David’s thirty years of contributions and impact at Tufts in just a few words and certainly impossible to do them adequate justice. The reason is simple: David himself. For over these three decades and in all seasons he has been a teacher, colleague, scholar and friend of exemplary caliber, leaving a landmark legacy no matter where he might be found: in the classroom, at a conference or perhaps his most cherished place away from home, the library and museum of Lev Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana, Russia.

What propelled David from his birth in New York to this career can be found in a childhood passion for the arts and languages that brought him to Williams College as an undergraduate in the mid 1960s. He stayed there after graduation, teaching Russian—as he would later coyly observe to me—thereby avoiding the draft during the Vietnam War. While true, this fact also obscures two things: first, he was hopelessly ensnared by a love for all things Russian (the exception being Soviet bureaucracy) and, second, that his tongue can often be observed firmly implanted in cheek. For as that war ended, David was already working on his Ph.D. in Russian literature at Harvard University, which he earned in 1979 and after which he came to Tufts.

As a scholar, David has tackled some of the biggest names in the business. Regarding prose, he has written not only on Tolstoy, but also Nikolai Gogol and Alexander Solzhenitsyn; for poetry Alexander Pushkin and Alexander Blok (for whom he has become the go-to guy), and in numerous articles has helped recover the woman’s voice in lyric poetry of the nineteenth century; and for literary theory, Mikhail Bakhtin. Even if seen from outside the field, these names are recognized as pillars of Russian literary culture. And collectively they open a window onto David himself, the one we recognize on campus.

It may be said that Tolstoy, as a writer, makes the conventional appear unconventional. But he, as an imaginative artist, gives us this effect as illusion. David, in what he has done for Tufts, actualizes it—no illusion here—taking the conventional roles and responsibilities of faculty at Tufts (and, indeed, of any university) and making them into something unique, setting his own pillars, as it were, in our program, department and university.

At the center stands his founding, nurturing and development of our Russian exchange program with Mendeleev University in Moscow, which over the course of the 1990s—one of the most dynamic, exciting and unpredictable times of Russian history—saw over eighty students pass through it. David did his utmost to provide our students with a unique experience of language, people and culture away from the conventional large universities and, pioneering for that time, worked to ensure that students would live with host families not in dormitories—a policy that easily doubled the normal workload but, in the long run, made the program such an exceptional one. This unconventional devotion extended as well to the dozens and dozens of Russian students who came here and for whom he served, among other things, as mentor and surrogate parent.
This devotion to students also defines David in the classroom and his impact as a teacher. The breadth of courses he has taught both in language and literature is tremendous, whether defined by period, genre or topic with standouts being his survey of the nineteenth century classics, special courses on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and also Women in Russian Literature and Culture. To this should be added his teaching many summers at Middlebury College’s intensive language school, which is truly the elite of language instruction in the United States.

Yet perhaps David’s impact extended even more where it was less seen, that is, in the number of independent studies and theses he has directed. His role in this capacity is not just exemplary or yeoman but a defining one, marking the quintessence of what it means to be a teacher and mentor—an achievement best signified by his directing of students in an oral history among Russian-Jewish immigrants in the Boston area that culminated in a volume, Across Generations, a copy of which is now in the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

While we might not have been able to see David in the classroom, many of us here no doubt served with him on one of the innumerable committees in which he participated and often directed. In this regard there was almost nowhere he couldn’t be found, but we should highlight in particular: Executive Committee, Curriculum Committee, Tenure and Promotion, Budget and Priorities, EPC and Phi Beta Kappa, serving ten years for the last one as its Marshal.

To be honest, however, any compartmentalization in honoring David is artificial, as it misses what he truly is: someone who recognizes no such boundaries which is perhaps best captured in his passion for music, sound and rhythm. From playing the violin as a child, to being a devout concert goer, to becoming an expert on lyric cycles, or to exploring the poetry of the great novel War and Peace—this spirit has always been the wind at his back. Perhaps the greatest evidence of this has been his sharp dancing at parties in the Russian House. For if you stayed long enough, you might be fortunate to see his dancing move from the floor onto one of the tables—no doubt a sign of a previous life spent as a famous Cossack dancer.

David leaves us with more time to devote to his beloved wife, Tanya, and son, Timothy, but also to a third person beginning with a “T”: his beloved Tolstoy, as he continues work on another book, one on that writer and his philosophy. It would be difficult in our field to think of a topic more daunting or challenging than Tolstoy and philosophy which is why, however, it shouldn’t surprise anyone that David has his sights set there. We wish David all the success in his retirement.

On behalf of the Department of German, Russian and Asian Languages and Literatures, I ask that this resolution be spread upon the minutes of the faculty and that a copy be given to Professor David Sloane.

Respectfully submitted,
Gregory Carleton
Associate Professor of Russian