Robert A. Plane, a professor emeritus of chemistry who served as the university’s eighth provost during the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s, later becoming an innovative Finger Lakes vintner, died August 6, 2018 at his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was 90.

He also served as president of Clarkson University and Wells College, co-authored a widely used collegiate chemistry textbook, and directed the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, now Cornell AgriTech, in Geneva, New York.

Plane had been on sabbatical leave from Cornell at the University at California, Berkeley, during turbulent times on the Cornell campus that included the Willard Straight Hall occupation in April 1969 and the resignation of President James Perkins.

When Plane returned to campus, he served on the presidential search committee and was sent to ask, then provost, Dale R. Corson to assume the presidency. Corson agreed to become the university’s president in summer 1969, on the condition that Plane become
provost. Plane agreed, and the Cornell Board of Trustees voted for him to become provost in September.

“I backed into the job,” he recalled. As provost, he helped Corson negotiate a critical era in the university’s history, marked by student protests for civil rights and against the Vietnam War.

In November 1972, Plane stepped down from his provost duties to meet personal, publishing and research deadlines.

Plane served as Clarkson University’s 12th president from 1974-1985; at the time, the second-longest presidency in its history. After leaving Clarkson, Plane returned to Cornell to lead the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva from 1986 to 1990. He was president of Wells College from 1991 to 1995.

Plane and Michell J. Sienko, Cornell professor of chemistry, published the seminal collegiate textbook chemistry in 1957, which became the world’s most widely used college chemistry book. His other books were Experimental Chemistry, in 1958; Physical Inorganic Chemistry, 1963; Elements of Inorganic Chemistry, 1965; and Chemistry: Principles and Properties, 1966.

Plane and his wife, Mary, purchased waterfront Cayuga Lake farmland in Ovid, New York, in 1964 and opened Plane’s Cayuga Vineyard in 1972. In hope of drawing visitors and prompting wine sales, the Planes worked with other wineries to establish the Cayuga Wine Trail – the first of its kind in the U.S. – in 1983. The Plane’s vineyard is now Cayuga Ridge Estate and the Thirsty Owl Wine Co.

Robert Allen Plane was born September 30, 1927, in Evansville, Indiana. He attended Evansville College (now the University of Evansville), graduating with a bachelor’s degree, magna cum laude, in 1948. Plane earned his Ph.D. in 1951 from the University of Chicago and worked for Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee.

In 1952, Plane joined Cornell as an instructor in chemistry. He received tenure in 1958 and became a full professor in 1962.
Plane is also survived by his wife of 55 years, Mary, four children and his sister.

Written by Blaine Friedlander
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