Robert S. Summers

September 19, 1933 – March 1, 2019

Robert S. Summers was the William G. McRoberts Professor Emeritus of Research in the Administration of Law at Cornell Law School. Bob was a prolific scholar and teacher in two major separate fields, legal theory and commercial law, an inspiring and dedicated teacher, and a valuable citizen of Cornell Law School and Cornell University for 42 years. Bob enjoyed a worldwide reputation through his books, articles, lectures, visiting professorships, and honors.

Bob graduated from the University of Oregon in 1955, where he was student body president and member of Phi Beta Kappa. Bob then graduated from Harvard Law School in 1959, before practicing law in Oregon for two years. In 1960, Bob began his law-teaching career at Oregon Law School. In 1969, Bob joined the Cornell Law School faculty.

Bob published more than 50 books and 100 articles, including a major treatise (with James J. White) on the Uniform Commercial Code, now in its sixth edition, that has been cited by innumerable courts over the years. His scholarship also included major works on
legal realism, statutory interpretation, and the form and substance of the law. Bob’s work has been translated into eight languages.

Bob spent many sabbaticals in England as a visiting scholar. In 1991, he was appointed the Arthur L. Goodhart Visiting Professor of Legal Science at Cambridge University. Bob was also a visiting professor abroad at the University of Sydney, the University of Vienna, and the University of Warwick, and in the U.S. at Stanford Law School and the University of Michigan.

In 1983, Bob co-founded the Bielefelder Kries, an international research group of scholars from 10 countries that published two books on comparative legal method. In 1993, the Russian government asked Bob to help draft that country’s new civil code. Later, he served as an adviser to the Drafting Commission for the Egyptian Civil Code, and as principal drafter for the Code of Contract Law for Rwanda.

Bob earned many honors over his 50-year academic career. He received honorary degrees from the University of Helsinki in Finland (1990) and the University of Gottingen in Germany (1994). In 1994, he was a Festschrift honoree, the subject of a collection of published essays written by 44 scholars from 12 countries, entitled “Prescriptive Formality and Normative Rationality in Modern Legal Systems.” Bob was also elected a Corresponding Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. In 2007, Bob was selected as a Brettschneider Cornell-Oxford Scholar, and spent the 2007 spring semester at Oxford University.

Bob’s contributions in the U.S. extended beyond his scholarship and teaching. Among the most notable, he was instrumental in the 1960s in paving the way for the CLEO (Council on Legal Education Opportunity) program, a national organization dedicated to increase the representation of minority and low-income students in law schools.

Generations of Cornell alumni know that Bob loved the Socratic Method and was an inspiring teacher. Students in his classes appreciated that Bob was a dedicated teacher who cared greatly
about the success of his students. He remained in contact with and supported many of his students throughout their careers.

Perhaps even more important than Bob’s remarkable career, he was a wonderful person. Bob was a loving husband, father, grandfather, and friend, with unbounded enthusiasm for life and learning. He was dedicated to and supportive of his wonderful wife, Dorothy, and his five children and 14 grandchildren. Somehow, Bob also had plenty of love and support as well for his many friends around the world.

Bob’s absence at Cornell Law School has left an unfillable chasm. But we are all very fortunate that Bob was with us at Cornell for most of his outstanding career.

Written by Robert A. Hillman