Dean Peter J. Awn

Remarks by Lisa Rosen-Metsch, Dean of the School of General Studies

University Senate Plenary

March 8, 2019

Good afternoon, it is an honor to speak today about the tremendous legacy of my predecessor, Dean Emeritus of the Columbia School of General Studies, Peter J. Awn.

For over four decades, Peter Awn, Professor of Religion, served Columbia University, including several years as a member of this Senate. While everyone will remember Peter and his gorgeous socks, the characteristics that truly set Peter apart were his warmth, wit, and never-ending dedication to his students. Nowhere was this dedication more visible and impactful than at the Columbia School of General Studies, where he served as Dean for twenty years.

Over those two decades, Peter worked on behalf of our nontraditional students and those pursuing nontraditional educational paths, knowing that not only the students, but the University as a whole, benefit from their inclusion in our classrooms. Peter often spoke to our incoming students about the importance of challenging your beliefs and the unique opportunity that Columbia provides to step outside your comfort zone and re-evaluate what you think you know.

In fighting for and securing a place at Columbia for the veterans, dancers, parents, entrepreneurs, chefs and other nontraditional students at GS, Peter was pushing the university to take diversity to its natural conclusion by including diversity of age, experience, and path in the composition of our undergraduate classroom. And through this diversity, asking the University itself to re-evaluate its
definition of a Columbia undergraduate and the nature of our academic discourse. Thousands of students, GSers and non-GSers alike, have benefitted from his vision, from his teachings and from his dedication to students who had previously been overlooked and undervalued.

I could not be more proud that under Peter’s leadership, Columbia GS returned to its roots as the Columbia school that was created in 1947 to educate veterans returning after World War II. Today, Columbia University is the destination place for student veterans and members of the armed services and we now have almost 500 undergrad veterans, which is 4 times the entire Ivy League combined. And Peter was a social force in helping Columbia and President Bollinger to bring ROTC back to campus. Notably, Peter could always be counted on to support our students in the most meaningful ways, whether it was being there to support the opening of the Stephen Donaldson Lounge for LGBTQ students, first in Furnald and then in Schapiro Hall, the Food Pantry in Lerner Hall, and always championing the need to focus on the mental health and well-being of our students.

On a personal note, I am so grateful for Peter’s mentorship and support in my first year as Dean of Columbia GS. I vividly recall my first conversation with Peter after President Bollinger appointed me as the ninth Dean of GS — Peter said he wanted to make sure I would have space to create my own vision and he would just be lurking from the bushes outside Lewisohn Hall. The reality was that I, like everyone else, cherished every moment with Peter and am so grateful that I could learn from him and just spend time with him. In fact, our GS Vice Dean Curtis Rodgers and myself had the privilege of being with Peter right before he was tragically struck by a car near campus. Peter was meeting with us to help us get ready for a trip to visit our new dual degree program with Trinity College Dublin and to meet with an alumna donor, and he even helped me wrap a present and, in his meticulous, precise manner, tied the bow on the present in a way that
only Peter could do (there is a picture of this last meeting on the slide show). In many ways, Peter gave us so many gifts and tied so many bows for thousands of us at Columbia over the years. There are few people in this world that I can say has had such a tremendous impact through his personal relationships, teaching, scholarship, service, and to our social structure here at Columbia.

As we reflect on Peter’s legacy and heal from our loss, I encourage all of us to honor his memory by embracing the opportunities to re-evaluate our beliefs and to celebrate the amazing possibilities that occur when we open our minds and our classrooms.