

# VISIONS

Volume X Issue VII  
November 24, 2008



## The Doctors (to be) Are In

Student success is laced  
with pricey side effects

---

## UB Makes It

Students take on Europe  
using Red Bull as currency

---

## 6 Months Out

Recent UB grad dishes out  
insight from the real world

---

## Deck the Halls

Your home-away-from-  
home holiday guide

## So Long, Albie

Ideology, teaching practices  
drive veteran professor to  
bid UB farewell



# So long, Albie

Ideology, teaching practices drive veteran professor to bid UB farewell

By Joshua Boston

Ever since Albert Michaels, Ph.D., a 71-year-old professor of history at UB, received a letter from one of his fellow faculty members, he's been planning his departure from the flagship SUNY school he loves.

"I love UB. I love the students," he said. "I'm leaving reluctantly."

For 43 years, Michaels has built a solid record of quality education in the classroom and activism in the community and abroad. Albie, as he's known to those closest to him, has seen the University through good times and bad, worked with colleagues strong and weak.

Back in the '60s, great historians like Gabriel Kolko, described by Michaels as a radical socialist, walked in the same halls as conservatives like Michaels.

"There was not only pride in undergraduate teaching," Michaels said of his early years. "There was also ideological diversity. You had people...who were conservatives and then you have people like Kolko who were on the extreme left."

The young professor's influence

grew throughout his career, both locally and internationally. In an Aug. 16, 1974 *Washington Post* article, Michaels was one of a few Americans credited with aiding in the release of former advisors to the socialist Chilean President Salvador Allende from prison, which was considered an important foreign policy achievement at the time.

Michaels's different school of thought isn't something that he perceives as welcome in the history department anymore. The time when it was acceptable to cross the ideological divide seems to have ended in Michaels's point of view.

In January, Michaels will begin his teaching term just a few miles from UB at Buffalo State College, where he will teach his same courses and help develop a revitalized piece of the Western New York art scene: After 10 years, Buffalo State's Burchfield Penney Art Center will re-open to exhibit the world's largest collection of watercolors by local artist Charles E. Burchfield.

"It's a wonderful opportunity," Michaels

said. "I'm interested in art and architecture. I get to be curator at the Burchfield Penney... (and) I'm going to a department which is very interested in undergraduate education."

Diane Christian, Ph.D., a SUNY distinguished teaching professor of English and a close friend of Michaels, understands why he is leaving UB.

"He's unhappy with his home department, and that along with the chance to do some important curating at the Burchfield Penney Gallery motivates his move to Buff State," Christian said.

Some students, especially those who identify with Michaels's ideologies, will undoubtedly miss the conservative professor's presence on campus. Scott Beaton and Aaron Greenberg, both senior political science and history majors, agree that Michaels's departure will be a major loss to students interested in contemporary American and Latin American history.

"More or less, I feel there will be a void in the department," Beaton said. "His course offerings are very unique within

the department.”

For some administrators, like Provost Satish Tripathi, Ph.D., Michaels’s abrupt departure is far more personal.

“It is always hard to see one of the members of our University community leave,” Tripathi said. “We understand these decisions are difficult for a faculty member to make and we always respect their decision. Prof. Michaels is a good friend and I wish him much continued success and happiness.”

Leaving UB is just as personal for Michaels, as he reflects on leaving behind a university that’s “starting to move again,” under President John B. Simpson, who is possibly “the best president we’ve ever had,” Michaels said.

But underneath Michaels’s deep love for UB lies his tremendous concern about the environment in the history department, all of which began with the aforementioned letter.

Just before the Fall 2006 semester began, one of Michaels’s history department colleagues, who Michaels had considered a friend, articulated the perceived ideological differences between the two professors in the form of a typed correspondence.

“I can’t be good humored about our political differences any more,” the letter to Michaels read.

It went on to say that, “the US actually seems to me to have tripped into a low-level (for the time being) Fascist dictatorship, with all the trappings—the militarism, fraudulent elections, disinformation, spying, and on and on.”

The professor concluded in his letter to Michaels that, “friendship across the politics just isn’t possible right now.” This ended what Michaels called a good prior relationship.

Of course, this came as a shock to Michaels: For years as a conservative democrat, he had never encountered anything but a civil dialogue with his colleagues.

“I have had enormous respect for some of my colleagues over the years, with whom I disagree,” Michaels said.

Well before the letter came to Michaels’s office, a much broader conflict engulfed the department. During the earlier years of the Iraq War, two history department faculty members circulated a petition condemning the United States’ military action.

Even though some of the most liberal members of the department felt as though the petition was inappropriate and unacceptable for the office environment, according to Michaels, 90 percent of the department’s faculty signed it.

“What made it worse—they posted it on the department door, which put an enormous amount of pressure on graduate students and untenured faculty to sign it,” Michaels said. “I thought that was outrageous.”

Events like this have culminated to form what Michaels calls the “ideological conformity,” in which a few of the senior faculty members encroached on the balance from Michaels’s earlier years.

However, this certainly isn’t the case with every member of the department’s faculty.

“The younger people, the junior professors in the department, I think are really wonderful,” Michaels said. “I’ve...really liked them. My quarrel is with four of the more senior people.”

Unfortunately, the perceived ideological imbalance isn’t simply an issue in the history department. Beaton, who was one of Michaels’s teaching assistants within the past few years, feels that the disparity is far more widespread.

“In terms of just a university setting, you tend to get more liberal-type thought,” Beaton said. He went on to say that it’s up to the students not to take what their professors say as the “gospel,” and instead form their own ideas from the facts professors have provided.

James Campbell, Ph.D., professor and chair of the political science department, agrees that the ideological imbalance exists in many university communities, but has a sense that it may be worse at UB.

“Students, faculty and the public deserve greater balance in a public university,” Campbell said in a written statement. “Without a critical mass of different viewpoints, a hegemonic liberal orthodoxy may not be properly restrained and both the fairness of teaching and the objectivity of research may unduly suffer.”

While Campbell went on to say that he believes there is “no willingness of the institution or the faculty to even recognize that a problem exists,” Tripathi sees it as a necessity to have differing opinions in the University community in order to foster an exciting academic atmosphere.

“As a university community, our most



“The university lives and thrives only in an atmosphere in which intellectual diversity is valued, intellectual debate is encouraged, and divergent enlightened opinions are freely expressed. The faculty are the embodiment of academic freedom and expression.”

– Satish Tripathi, Ph.D., provost



“I do think people of opposing ideologies can and should get along in the workplace and everywhere... We should respect and love each other too, but as literature and films show us, human beings fail a lot. If we’re lucky we make art and understanding out of loss and I think Professor Michaels will.”

– Diane Christian, Ph.D., SUNY distinguished teaching professor of English



“I do share Dr. Michaels’s concerns about the lack of ideological diversity at UB, especially in the social sciences and the humanities. This is not a problem unique to UB, but my sense is that it is worse here than at many other universities. Students, faculty, and the public deserve greater balance in a public university.”

– James Campbell, Ph.D., professor and chair of the political science department

important role is to nurture an intellectually vibrant environment and educate our students so that they are prepared to seek answers to the most pressing questions of their generation," Tripathi said.

This is where the crux of the matter lies for Michaels: Not only has ideological conflict lent itself to intradepartmental conflict, but it also had a negative effect on the students.

"History is a pretty important discipline. We're shaping students' view of the world," Michaels said. "I think it's important to have ideological diversity... I've been arguing this, but nobody will listen."

Despite Michaels's discontent with the ideological state of his department, he maintains that his leaving to teach at Buffalo State is not a political move, but rather a personal one.

"The real reason I'm leaving is because I'm in an environment that I'm personally uncomfortable in, and ideology is a part of it," Michaels said.

As a sister issue to the ideological imbalance, Michaels has also noticed a serious decline in the importance of undergraduate education to his fellow faculty members.

Michaels keeps his classical allure by building relationships with students and giving precedence to teaching rather than research. Nearly every one of Michaels's courses has an attendance policy, not to punish students for their absence, but to make sure that students want to be there, and so Michaels can learn all of their names.

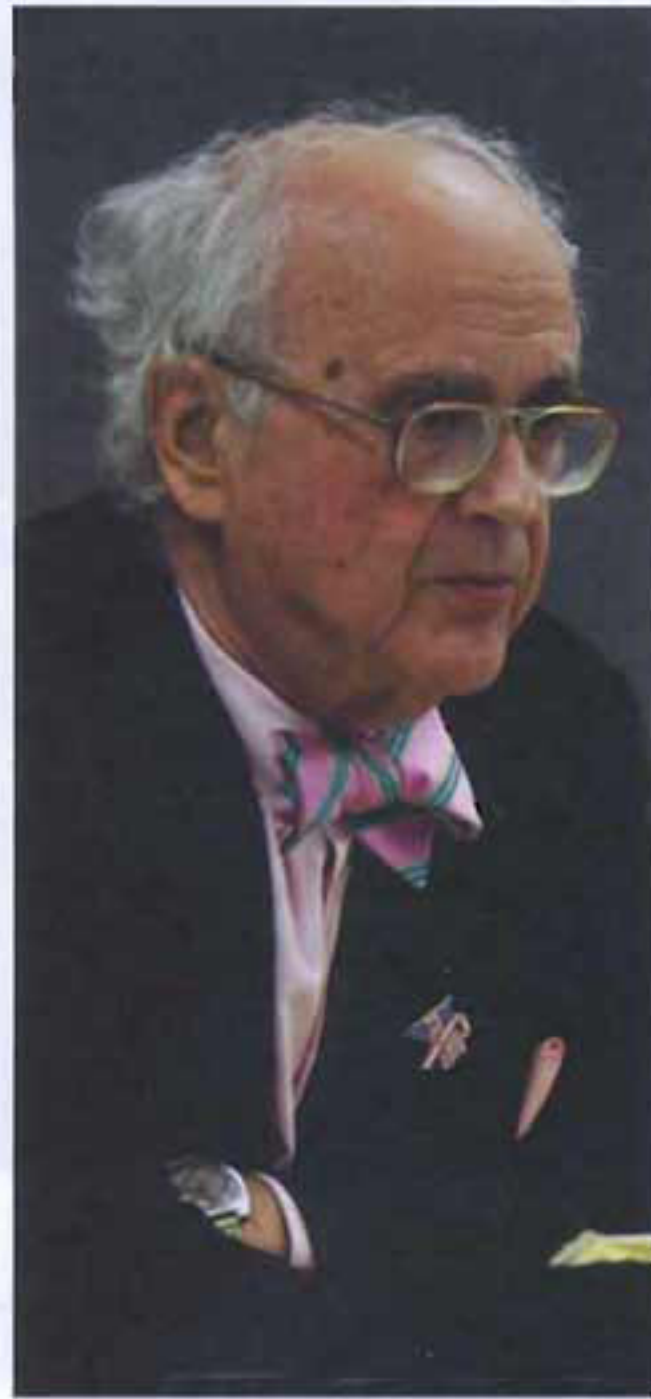
"I think this is a university-wide problem of recognizing good undergraduate teaching by rewarding it," Michaels said.

Of course, Michaels recognizes that there are a number of professors who continue to care about their performance in the classroom. The issue falls with departments and the University for not encouraging education to thrive along with research.

David Gerber, Ph.D., professor and chair of the history department, and Bruce McCombe, Ph.D., SUNY distinguished professor of physics and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, declined to comment for this article.

Students, however, see the issue as one of course offerings, especially as it relates to Michaels. Once he leaves to teach at Buffalo State College, Beaton said that the history department will lack a true 20th century historian.

"I think the biggest problem, at least from what I've seen at this university, is



**"My closest friends, for the most part, have been people who I disagree with ideologically."**

— Prof. Albert Michaels

hiring not necessarily on students' academic aspirations," Beaton said.

Moreover, students Beaton and Greenberg feel as though their social sciences majors are widely ignored as well.

"I think the bigger problem is that social sciences as a whole here are largely neglected, and the professors are just kind of stretched all over the place," Greenberg said.

As Albie Michaels leaves the university he has come to love over nearly a half century, the issues of ideological imbalance and undergraduate teaching are left in the hands of administrators and, perhaps more importantly, the students.

"If (students) want ideological diversity, they should let the university know it," Michaels said. "...Nothing is ever going to change if the students themselves don't come forward and say something." 