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William R. Smith : Distinguished Achievement Award - Social Sciences

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2008 Distinguished Achievement Award - Social Sciences

William R. Smith '73

Scholar, researcher, mentor to and advocate for undergraduate and graduate students, writer, boys and girls hockey team manager, and responsible, caring citizen all epitomize the many roles that William Smith fulfills. But it was the “intellectually and politically charged atmosphere of SNC” when he was a student that provided Bill “the framework with which to make sense of the challenges presented during those times of change,” and in the years since.

After graduating cum laude from St. Norbert with a major in sociology, Bill earned his M.A. (1977) and his Ph.D. (1984) in sociology from Rutgers University. While he was at Rutgers, he was first a teaching assistant in sociology, then a full-time research associate for the Institute for Criminological Research at Rutgers. There he examined the effect that various types of contexts have on the lives of juveniles in group homes and how they were affected by their environments in and out of group homes. After completing his doctorate, Bill taught at Rutgers until taking a position in 1993 at North Carolina State University, where he continues to teach and do scholarly research.

Although his academic interests span a broad spectrum of important issues, it may have been his dissertation, in which he explored the self-esteem of juveniles in correctional facilities, that led him to much of his research, writing and teaching. For instance, two sabbaticals in Stockholm, Sweden, enabled him to concentrate his studies on the causes of delinquency. From this experience, he composed and published a monograph on the vital role Swedish mothers play in motivating children towards achieving educational and occupational goals.

Since then, there appear to be three major areas of interest in Bill’s scholarly pursuits: the social ecology (or environment) of crime, racial profiling, and education and crime. In the first of these areas, he has paid particular attention to understanding the characteristics of communities that are conducive to crime, fear of crime and victimization. The National Institute of Justice awarded him a \$63,000 grant to identify ways to mitigate crime in public housing complexes.

His was a pioneering study of racial profiling in traffic stops by police. A \$500,000 National Institute of Justice grant funded a multi-method investigation of drivers of different ethnic backgrounds that presented a breakthrough in studies of racial profiling. The evidence of possible racial bias his study provided has had far-reaching implications for the relationship between the police and the African-American community. Because Bill recognized a link

between education and crime, he has dedicated much of his time and effort to educating at-risk and institutionalized populations. His “Project Success: Remediating Linguistic Inefficiency” program focuses on teaching inmates to read by using a phonic approach. He has also organized a program to prepare tutors and mentors in public housing areas to teach reading skills to learning disabled youth.

Bill’s publications are many—he has co-authored two books and 42 articles. In addition, he has received 27 grants and awards, made nearly 60 presentations, organized several panels, performed 36 service and committee assignments and provides consultations. He also has a multitude of “outside” activities such as serving on the board of directors for the re-entry corporation that provides alternatives to prisoners, heading the Taylor Sociology Club for undergraduates, and fulfilling a number of roles in professional associations, including being program chair for the annual meetings of the American Criminological Society.

Bill says that he tries “to see every day as an opportunity to learn more about how the world works.” To current students, he cautions them “to study what really interests them and delay as long as possible a choice that sets them on a specific career path.”

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