

Tributes to Prof. Michael R. Smith from students

We, the students fortunate enough to have learned from Dr. Michael Smith, will always cherish the time spent in his classroom. Though his scholarly achievements are renowned, it was his ability to make complex ideas accessible, often with a touch of humor, that left a lasting impression on us all.

Ever the positivist, Dr. Smith appreciated the rigor of empirical research, but he also valued thoughtful questioning and curiosity. He encouraged us to challenge assumptions and approach problems with both precision and creativity, always pushing us to go beyond the data and consider the broader implications of our findings.

Though Dr. Smith primarily taught undergraduates, he was present at every event that sought to develop graduate students, whether acting as a discussant or simply participating. All one had to do was ask him, and he would come. His advice was always thoughtful and thorough, offering deep insights into our work. Yet, what made his feedback truly memorable was his ability to infuse humor into even the most serious discussions, reminding us that intellectual growth didn't need to come at the cost of a lighthearted perspective.

A lifelong Tottenham fan, Dr. Smith never missed an opportunity to acknowledge anyone wearing the colors of a rival Premier League team, always greeting them with a lighthearted quip about their choice of allegiance.

Dr. Smith's influence extended far beyond the classroom. His blend of sharp intellect, genuine support, and humor left a lasting impression on all who had the privilege of knowing him. Whether guiding us through academic challenges or sharing a laugh over football, he reminded us that learning and life should always be approached with passion and curiosity. Though his memory will live on through his work, we will carry his lessons—and his lighthearted spirit—with us always.

Thank you for the memories and may you rest in peace, Dr. Smith.

Below we have some memories from current and former graduate students of Dr. Smith and students who had the opportunity to engage with him:

“Prof. Smith was an outstanding mentor - he supported intellectual curiosity at every turn, carved out meaningful opportunities for collaboration, and sharpened insights. As an undergraduate at McGill, I was interested in how sociology could re-envision the study of economic life, or at least complement what was taught in the economics program. The department had strong economic sociology courses at the time, including a class on Organizations with Prof. Smith. These courses fundamentally changed how I saw the world. Inspired, I applied to PhD programs and was fortunate that the department accepted me, in effect shielding me from the labour market of the Great Recession. The summer before

classes started, Prof. Smith hired me to figure out how to use the Panel Study of Income Dynamics for a project on unemployment insurance generosity. Given this training and the scale of unemployment at that time, job loss became of great interest to me and even the subject of my thesis. Along the way, Prof. Smith was always an advocate, and pushed me to pursue opportunities and even new fields, like demography. This tribute became a little too focused on me, but the larger point is that Prof. Smith gave people chances to build ideas and careers, and what a success that is. He is deeply missed.”

– Dr. Nicole Denier, former PhD supervisee of Dr. Smith, University of Alberta.

“It is with deep sorrow that I remember Professor Smith. He had an uncompromising commitment to research excellence, strict but affectionate guidance, profound wisdom, and tremendous support for his students. These were instrumental not only for my academic journey, but they also touched many others at McGill Sociology.

During my PhD program, he provided me with many opportunities to learn what it takes to succeed in academia. He took the time to guide me through the processes of writing, publishing, and presenting at conferences, and he was always prompt in responding to my inquiries. Even after I moved away from Montreal and struggled with my dissertation, he remained encouraging and supportive—in his own unique way. I remember once expressing my feelings of guilt about not being productive and his response was: “Guilt is the best source of production.” It may not work for everyone, but I appreciated his perspective and truly enjoyed our discussions filled with his British wit.

Professor Smith had a remarkable ability to spark ideas among those around him, fostering an environment where curiosity thrived. His legacy will live on through many students he mentored and beyond. I am grateful to have had the privilege of learning from him and will carry his lessons with me always.”

– Dr. Yoko Yoshida, former supervisee of Dr. Smith, University of Western Ontario

“A little memory about Michael Smith from me: When I started the program in Fall 2022, Michael Smith was the first faculty member I had a conversation with at the welcome party at Thomson House at the beginning of the school year. When he found out I was from New Brunswick, he started talking about how eastern fishing communities have influenced unemployment benefits in Canada. We ended up having a long conversation about lobster fishing politics in the Maritimes and he remains the person most keenly interested in that topic that I’ve ever met! I loved how curious and eager for information he was.”

– Rebecca Haines, PhD Candidate.

“Michael Smith was a remarkable person - kind, good-humoured, and always ready with a smile. I had the pleasure of being his TA for two years, during which I truly enjoyed our post-class chats. Despite our different areas of Sociology, he showed genuine interest in my

research, always asking insightful and thought-provoking questions. I'll never forget the day he told me, 'Every time you walk in with a Chelsea hat, you wound my soul.' This comment kicked off a full year of spirited soccer banter between us.

What struck me most about Michael, though, was his dedication to the graduate student community. He attended every professional development workshop, offering invaluable advice—often with a dash of tongue-in-cheek humour. While his academic and scholarly achievements speak for themselves, it was his kindness and support for others that truly made him unforgettable. He will be deeply missed by all who knew him."

– Ann-Marie Helou, PhD Candidate

"I will always remember Dr. Michael Smith. Above being a remarkable sociologist, I will remember him for his compassion, understanding and motivation in the world, to never stop being curious, asking questions and knowing there's is so much more than what is in front of you. I was his TA during my first year of my PhD and I owe great appreciation to Dr. Smith for how much he helped me navigate what was then, a very scary and new world to me. I told him about my research, expecting nothing more than for it to be the topic of that day's conversation. Yet, he always would send me emails with ideas, new perspectives, and suggestions of people who may be of help for my methods or research niche. I sometimes think when I get an email it will be him.

One of the most special moments with Dr Smith, was when I had asked him to be a faculty discussant for a workshop conference, and he came to campus just to attend my session, and read my entire master's thesis, when he did not need to. I will never forget his pat on the back, and one of the kindest smiles, a genuine encouragement to keep on going. I may have known Dr. Smith for only two years, but his impact, support and knowledge will stick with me forever. Rest in peace, Michael."

– Michaela Michalopoulos, PhD Candidate