Longtime faculty member Russ Robins retires

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Professor of Finance Russ Robins, who retired in June, won the Howard W. Wissner Award, voted on by graduating MBA students to honor their favorite teacher, a record nine times during his career at the Freeman School.

Russ Robins spent the better part of his career teaching statistics, so it makes sense that he'd continue his focus on numbers in retirement.

"My daughter gave me a Fitbit, and I'm kind of a fanatic about it," he says. "I try and walk 10 miles a day — that's about 21,000 steps — and I usually accomplish it. Since 2016, my yearly average has exceeded 20,000 steps a day. That's a part of my life now."

On July 1, Robins, the Jessica L. Streiffer and Edward L. Streiffer Chair in International Finance, retired, bringing to a close his 35-year career as a full-time professor and administrator. Although he plans to do some consulting and continue teaching on a part-time basis, he's looking forward to enjoying a new life in Woodbine, Maryland, about 40 minutes outside Baltimore, where he and his wife, Marilyn, moved to be closer to their son and daughter and their three grandchildren.

In recognition of his service to the university, Robins was appointed Professor Emeritus by the Board of Tulane.

His retirement marks the end of an era. From 1989 to 2022, Robins was a mainstay of the Freeman faculty. He served as associate dean for academic programs from 1996 to 2001, where he oversaw all the Freeman School's graduate and undergraduate programs, and as associate dean of executive education from 2001 to 2011, where he directed the EMBA program and oversaw the opening of the Freeman School's satellite campus in Houston.

Where Robins stood out the most, however, was as a teacher. He received nine Howard W. Wissner Awards, which are voted on by the graduating MBA class in recognition of their favorite professor.

"I think that's the result of a couple of things," Robins says. "One is that my electives were well attended, so I had more people who were exposed to my teaching and these awards are body-count things. But I do think the students liked my teaching and appreciated it and were very gracious in their comments and their voting."

Robins credits former Dean James McFarland giving him his start in teaching. After earning his PhD in economics from the University of California at San Diego in 1982, Robins got a job as an economist with Data Resources in Lexington, Massachusetts, following by a brief stint with Shearson Lehman/American Express in New York and

then four years as a senior econometrician with Transworld Oil in Bermuda.

“By then, my daughter was going into first grade, so we thought maybe it’s time to get back to the States,” Robins recalls. “McFarland was great to me and made me a very good offer.”

Robins had taught previously in the Harvard Summer School and at NYU, but he had never taught full time before and was eager to prove himself.

“I wanted to be the best teacher at the Freeman school,” he says. “I asked people who’s the best teacher and everybody told me it’s John Trapani, so I asked Trap if I could sit in on his class. He’s a brilliant teacher. His lectures were extremely organized, and John is incredibly precise in his language. I learned a lot from John’s teaching. My goal was always to overtake him in teacher rankings, but I don't think I ever did.”

As a teacher, Robins had a special gift for making quant-heavy courses like econometrics and decision models understandable to non-quants. One way he did that was through videos. Long before online programs and asynchronous courses became common, Robins recorded meticulous videos for his homework problems, illustrating how to solve them in a step-by-step format that enabled students to follow along at their own pace and re-watch however many times they’d like.

“I encouraged the students to try the homework on their own, but when they were done — or if they didn’t get it — my video solutions explained the whole problem. The video solutions are like the best answer key imaginable. Not to speak out of turn, but I think the students loved the videos and many told me that they didn’t even bother reading the book anymore.”

One quirk of Robins’ long career is that he never taught an undergraduate course. He often tells a story about teaching a class of Chinese students in the late ’90s. After spending 10 minutes of class time working through a complicated problem on the board, he got the wrong answer. Embarrassed, he apologized and said he needed to go back and see what he had done wrong. All the students immediately pointed to where he’d written the wrong number down several steps before.

“Why didn’t you tell me I made a mistake?” he asked.

“Because in China,” one of the students replied, “you never interrupt a professor.”

“I enjoyed teaching our Chinese students, but one thing I like about American students, especially graduate students, is that they’re happy to challenge you,” Robins says. “With MBAs, you’re dealing with students in their late 20s, early 30s, and they’ve got more experience than undergraduates, so they’re willing to say, ‘No, I think you’re wrong.’ And I like that.”

These days, Robins spends his time working on consulting projects, reading for pleasure, listening to podcasts, traveling, teaching one class a year at Freeman and spending time with his grandkids.

“Retirement scared the hell out of me,” he says. “I’ve always been kind of a motivated person, so I didn’t know how I was going to handle it. In 2022 Dean Goes kindly let me take a two-year leave — without pay — to help me figure this thing out. So now, after a couple of years, I think I’m finally adjusting to retirement. And I kind of like it.”

Robins said he would love to hear from his former students. His email address remains russellr@tulane.edu.