



Josef Mestenhauser, left, a young adviser in 1959, welcomed international students and urged them to get involved. Photo courtesy of University Archives.

All hands on deck

Pioneering international educator Josef Mestenhauser, 1925–2015, gave urgency to the work of teaching and learning

MARCH 2015

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story was underway when we received news that Professor Mestenhauser passed away on March 14. See also the notice on the CEHD news blog.

AS A YOUNG LAW STUDENT at Charles University in Prague, Czechoslovakia, Josef Mestenhauser had dreams of someday working in a diplomatic position, perhaps with the United Nations. That all changed in 1948 when he was arrested and jailed for his anti-communist activities.

With the help of an underground network, Mestenhauser fled from prison. At a refugee camp in Germany, he joined a group that set up what they called colleges to give lectures to each other on topics they knew—anything to keep education in their lives.

“When I escaped, I lost virtually everything—family, education, friends, and a future career, either in politics or diplomacy,” Mestenhauser wrote later. “But what I and all my exiled friends never lost were our ideals and faith in democracy and freedom.”*

Mestenhauser eventually made it to eastern Washington, where he completed a U.S. undergraduate degree on a scholarship as a ski instructor. He did not intend to spend his life in the United States. But 43 years would pass before he would return to his native country.

Tapping the power of international students

Mestenhauser came to Minnesota for graduate school in political science, earning his master’s degree in 1952 and Ph.D. in 1960. He was part of the post-war surge in international educational exchange, and he dedicated his life to helping students outside their home countries, by choice or not.

For 40 years, Mestenhauser held a series of positions in student and academic affairs. He began as a graduate assistant working for international student adviser Forrest Moore, ’53, and eventually served as professor and director of the systemwide Office of International Education in the 1980s.

“Forrest hired me—he’s the one to blame for my achievement and motivation!” Mestenhauser commented years later. “He absolutely demanded a pedagogical foundation for everything.”

With Moore, Mestenhauser was a founder of the Minnesota International Center, created to engage the community in welcoming international students. He lobbied at the legislature and raised funds for scholarships. He played a key role in building NAFSA: Association of International Educators, which grew to 10,000 members, and later served as its president.

Every year at orientation, Mestenhauser personally welcomed international students and urged them to get involved, to learn as well as teach by sharing the knowledge they brought to the campus, inside and outside the classroom. He constantly fought for international students to be treated as an asset and had little patience for bureaucracy, timidity, or short-term thinking.

Lives were at stake. The future was at stake.

An interdisciplinary thinker

Mestenhauser's dedication to developing a theoretical foundation for international education began when, as a young professional, he made a presentation to the College of Education faculty.

"At the end of my presentation, professor Bob Beck said, 'That's all fine, but where's the theory?'" Mestenhauser remembered. He had to develop it himself.

Reading across the disciplines and from many cultural perspectives, he wrote, presented, and published papers, articles, chapters, and books. He developed his ideas during time in the Philippines, Korea, and Japan as a Fulbright scholar. He discussed ideas with faculty who founded the comparative and international development education (CIDE) program in the College of Education and Human Development in the 1980s.

Mestenhauser's work challenged linear, isolated thinking. He drew extensively on the fields of education, psychology, political science, and communication. His ability to foresee paradigm shifts in education was reflected in recent years in his fascination with cognitive complexity and neuroscience. International education is complex and constantly changing, he argued, with culture at its very core.

In the fight against ignorance and dogmatism, Mestenhauser never wavered in his fierce belief in the power of education.

Mentoring a new generation

Though he remained deeply connected to his Czech roots, over time Mestenhauser lost hope of returning. Then in 1991, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the unthinkable happened. He and many of his surviving peers were contacted and invited back to Prague to be awarded the academic degrees they had earned but never received.

Back in Minnesota, Mestenhauser was appointed honorary consul for the Czech Republic and penned a collection of articles about the emerging political and cultural landscape.

A good life

[Joe] was a big man, his hair gone white; he somehow managed to look both stately and overworked when I saw him on campus. He always wore a gray business suit, not the standard rumpled academic corduroys, and a pearl tie tack pinned in the center of his silk tie. His manner was formal, his courtesy organic. Very Czech, I thought. And I suppose it is always striking to see someone no longer young who has retained ideals about a better world, someone still trying to make things come out right, though things went very wrong for him long ago. “Why should I complain?” he said when I asked him about this. “It’s been a good life.”

— Patricia Hampl, *A Romantic Education*, 1992 edition, p. 312.

At the University, he left his administrative post and in 1992 joined the CEHD faculty. He poured his energy into the CIDE program as it gained approval to offer the Ph.D.

Joan DeJaeghere was exploring graduate programs when she got Mestenhauser’s name.

“I made a cold call to Joe and he spent an hour with me,” says DeJaeghere, now associate professor and coordinator of the CIDE program. “He introduced me to so many people, and his interdisciplinary approach really influenced my thinking.”

Mestenhauser spent the last 10 years of his University career teaching the next generation, including in his native Czech Republic with his fourth Fulbright award. After retirement, he continued reading, writing, giving lectures with his signature dry sense of humor, publishing, and connecting scholars around the world. Last fall, young scholars crowded into a conference room in St. Paul to hear him speak on a panel.

“I finally realize that I didn’t really understand what Joe was saying when I was a graduate student in the classroom—I understood maybe five percent

of all things,” says Miki Horie, '03, now an associate professor at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto and a leading international educator in Japan. But, she explains, Mestenhauser trusted that students would process information over time to develop critical thinking skills. “I was able to take my own step forward with his help.”

Kay Thomas, '85, mentored by Mestenhauser throughout her career, rose to international prominence in intercultural counseling and student services. She watched him advance the careers of women and men of all backgrounds.

“Joe cared deeply about his students and colleagues and wanted them to be the best they could be,” she says. “He made you believe you could do it! And then he gave the time and the resources if he had them to make that possible.”

Read more about Josef Mestenhauser and the [Mestenhauser Legacy Initiative](#). More information about a public memorial will be posted as it becomes available on the [CEHD news blog](#).

Story by Elizabeth Schwartz and Gayla Marty | March 20, 2015

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