MEMORANDUM

January 27, 2011

TO: Faculty and Staff

FROM: Scott A. Bass, Provost

RE: Death of Professor Robert Griffith

It is with deep sadness that I inform you of the death of Robert Griffith, Professor of History, who passed away on Tuesday, January 25, 2011.

Bob joined the American University community in 1995 as Provost. In this position, he devoted himself to faculty recruitment and sharply increased the presence of minority faculty, enhanced the role of new information technologies, and helped prepare the university's new strategic plan, “Building a Global University.” He joined the faculty in the Department of History as Professor in 1997 and served as chair of the department from 2004 to the present.

“Historians most often leave their mark on the profession and the intellectual communities they inhabit through their written work,” said Kathleen Franz. “Bob also made a substantial contribution to the profession, the Department of History, and American University through his role as a masterful, imaginative and principled administrator,” she added. Under his leadership, the History department flourished in enrollments and the quality of its faculty and students.

He was an outstanding academic leader who was always interested in advancing
the scholarship and career of faculty members. His genuine concern for the University and the quality of its academic enterprise was evident, but equally important to Bob was the individual faculty member, the development, growth and welfare of each one. His colleagues remember him fondly as a staunch supporter for the development of faculty. “He reached out a helping hand to senior and junior faculty alike, comprehending that at every phase of academicians’ careers they need assistance and encouragement to advance. He also realized that their personal success enhances the reputation and quality of the institution as a whole and serves our students well,” noted Alan Kraut.

Reflecting on Bob’s legacy, Max Friedman stated, “Bob already held a national reputation as a historian of Cold War political history when he came to AU, and he applied the same wise judgment and passion for justice to his work in administration. Yet even while developing intellectual and institutional networks around the campus and in the Washington area, nurturing junior faculty, and overseeing tremendous growth in majors and graduates, Bob made it all look easy. He set a tone of relaxed conviviality, always ready with a wink and a smile and a generous portion of his time and sage advice for anyone who crossed his path, whether a high-school student curious about college or a new teacher facing the challenges of the classroom. He seemed constantly to be looking out for everyone’s interests, helping a doctoral student facing financial woes, comforting members of the History community through illness and loss, and ensuring that senior colleagues received the recognition commensurate with their achievements. If there was a secret to his success, it might have been his absolute conviction that administration was not a chore but an intellectual puzzle to be solved with creativity, and his understanding that good management builds good communities. Or perhaps it was simply his heart, which had a place for all of us.”

Bob’s own achievements well exceeded his role as an administrator. He was author of The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate , which won the Frederick Jackson Turner Prize of the Organization of American Historians. His articles and essays have appeared in many scholarly journals, including the American Historical Review , the Journal of American History , Reviews in American History and Business History Review . Among his edited works are: The Specter: Original Essays on McCarthyism and the Cold War ; Ike’s Letters to a Friend: 1941-1958 ; and Major Problems in American History Since 1945 .
Griffith held fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Harry S. Truman Library Institute. He served on the Board of Editors of the *Journal of American History*. He received teaching awards from the University of Georgia and from the Danforth Foundation. Outside the university, he served the Organization of American Historians (OAH) as its treasurer, and in this capacity helped get the organization on a secure financial footing.

Robert Griffith was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1940, and grew up in Southern Indiana. He earned his B.A. at DePauw University, where he was a Rector Scholar and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. He held faculty positions at the University of Georgia and at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he also served as Chair of the Department of History. From 1989 to 1995, Bob served as Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland at College Park. There he helped implement a rigorous new core curriculum, dramatically increased the presence of women and minority faculty and staff, coordinated planning and design for the new $130 million Clarice Smith Center for the Performing Arts, and helped make the college a campus leader in the use of innovative information technologies.

Bob’s creativity as an administrator and a scholar, his commitment to building intellectual and professional community at AU and his caring humanity as an individual were specific strengths. “No situation was so dire that a reasonable compromise and a little laughter could not provide the beginning of a remedy. His warm smile and gentle ways were his greatest assets and the qualities that will be most missed by his colleagues,” concluded Alan Kraut.

Bob is survived by his wife Barbara, two sons, and several grandchildren. A memorial service at American University is being planned and will be announced as soon as plans are finalized.