

To borrow a phrase from the lexicon of political consultants, Gary Copeland has been “on message” for a long time. And the message is an optimistic one.

Copeland, recently named director of the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Study Center, has spent two decades working at the center and teaching political science at OU. He seeks, among other things, to promote the idea that representative democracy works—when citizens get involved and learn how it operates. His observations as a campaign analyst have been quoted in the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, and his scholarly work has merited awards and recognition on the national, state and local levels.

Yet well before that career began, before the future director was even old enough to shave, he literally was ringing doorbells trying to raise political awareness.

“At seven years old, in the 1960 presidential campaign, I was going door to door, campaigning and distributing flyers,” he recalls of his boyhood near Akron, Ohio. “I was always interested in politics. The personalities, the conflict, the resolution of conflict, finding solutions to problems—it’s all just interesting to me.”

From those childhood displays of partisan zeal, Copeland has evolved into a determinedly nonpartisan, but still animated and energetic, advocate of constructive citizen involvement in politics. As a scholar, he concentrates on how the U.S. Congress functions as a representative body.

Copeland’s bully pulpit and teaching post is the Carl Albert Center, where his service began in 1980 under founding director Ron Peters, from 1986 onward as associate director, and now as Peters’ successor. He counts himself lucky to have Peters’ example to follow.

“I think it’s rare when one is so fortunate to take over



Robert Taylor

OU political scientist Gary Copeland pauses beside the bust of the late U.S. House Speaker Carl Albert, whose name graces the Congressional Research and Study Center at the University of Oklahoma.

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a vibrant, successful organization and try to lead it,” he says, “as opposed to taking over an organization that’s floundering, that’s underfinanced, that has all sorts of challenges, and try to build it.

“It’s like a relay race, where you just grab the baton and continue the run, as opposed to getting things moving to begin with.”

Copeland’s early interest in politics took him on a straight line into the academic realm. He received his B.A. in political science with honors from Baylor in 1975, an M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1976, and a Ph.D. from Iowa in 1979. He was selected as an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow, serving in 1979-80.

Offered a post at the new Carl Albert Center in 1980, Copeland remembers it as standing out among the “embarrassment of opportunities” available to him upon completing his fellowship. Although the center was barely off the ground, “in my field, it was literally the best job in the country at the time.”

But the center faced challenges in establishing recognition and credibility—among them, its location.

“The truth of the matter is that most people don’t think of Norman, Oklahoma, first when they think of a place to study Congress,” Copeland explains. “So, Ron Peters had to develop a plan to convince people that we could study Congress effectively here in Norman. This meant bringing speakers to Norman—elected officials and other congressional scholars—and also getting students to Washington on fellowships.”

Since its establishment, the center has shown a commitment to civic education and political science through creating a congressional archive, the Julian J. Rothbaum public lecture series, and the center’s undergraduate and graduate programs.

Copeland has been responsible for administering the

graduate program, which selects one or two students annually for three years of coursework, one year's fellowship in Washington, and one year of dissertation work.

"It's been very successful," he says proudly. "We've sent out some people who've stayed in Washington and held positions of pretty considerable importance. We've also turned out a number of first-rate political scientists now employed at universities from coast to coast—from Maine to California."

But Copeland is reluctant to take credit for the success of the center's graduate program, which draws entrants on a national basis. Praise is due his predecessor, he says: "Ron's the one who put together the five-year curriculum."

He also gives kudos to Cindy Simon Rosenthal, who oversees the center's undergraduate program, for her work in matching student research fellows and research assistants to mentoring faculty members. And he boasts that eight of the center's nine past Rothbaum lecturers went to on serve as presidents of the American Political Science Association—and the ninth, Theda Skocpol of Harvard, "will be shortly."

But while Copeland is quick to praise others, his colleagues have praised him as well, with numerous honors. He was picked by the Policy Studies Organization as having presented the best political science paper nationally in 1985-86. The Oklahoma Political Science Association named him their Scholar of the Year in 1996. He was chosen this year as president of the Southwestern Political Science Association and was selected as an OU Associates Distinguished Lecturer in 1984-85 and 1988-89.

One award, a selection as a national Mentor of Distinction by the Women's Caucus for Political Science, especially delighted Copeland. "I've always taken seriously my role in trying to nurture students. I had superb role models, and I appreciate being recognized as a mentor."

Apart from the center, Copeland tries to serve the community and engender interest in the political realm in other ways. A member of the Norman Board of Education since 1996, and its current president, he believes it important for citizens to contribute to representative democracy by being "engaged in politics."

And as an analyst, Copeland's opinions can be found during election cycles in the state and national press, as well as on television and radio in the area. His aim when giving commentary, he says, is not partisan spin, but instead "to get people to think about something in a different way than they've thought about it before."

Similarly, "I think also that one of the keys to the Carl Albert Center's success has been that we have not become entwined in partisan politics," he adds. "Similar organizations often do, and it's the kiss of death. We count Republicans and Democrats among our friends."

As a nonpartisan entity, Copeland believes that in the years ahead the center can make a significant contribution to civic education, among students at the primary and secondary levels and with interested adults.

"There are a number of creative and interesting programs in the nation that link state legislatures with universities and through them with the public," he notes. "I would like to see the center do more of that—to help

people better appreciate how legislatures function and learn to be more effective in their interactions with them."

In an era awash with popular cynicism about politics, Copeland believes that "too often the American public criticizes its government for being exactly what they've created. Many or most of its shortcomings could be improved through a more effective citizenry."

Yet he notes, "I think the American public is far more sophisticated about politics than we were 15 or 20 years ago. We have better analytic tools than we did then—we just need to continue to develop them."

And he adds, with characteristic optimism, "I think we're getting there."

—MICHAEL WATERS



Robert Taylor

A political junkie from the age of seven, newly appointed director Gary Copeland takes the scholar's approach in keeping the University of Oklahoma's Carl Albert Center attuned to the process but free from partisan politics.