

Professor William O. Beeman Chair, Department of Anthropology

By Amber Bathke



Professor William Beeman

“Did you know that only certain birds sing?” asks Professor William Beeman, long-time participant in University Senate governance, breaking into a grin that belies his delight at the idea. Professor Beeman is not an ornithologist; his interest in birdsong is just one example of the varied facets of his career in linguistic anthropology. He gives off a similar sense of wonder about other aspects of his work: having had the pleasure of taking one of Professor Beeman’s courses, *Biology, Evolution, and Cultural Development of Language*, in grad school, I remember this infectious sense of delight as one of the reasons I found his course so engaging.

Beeman completed his undergraduate work in anthropology at Wesleyan University, and then went on to a Master’s and PhD at the University of Chicago. While doing doctoral work on discourse analysis in Iran, Beeman became interested in traditional performing arts in Asia. Eventually, this led to an unusual path in his career: although he was already tenured faculty at Brown University, he felt that he lacked an “insider’s” view of performing arts, and decided to attend the Boston Conservatory to study vocal performance. He later spent three years performing as an operatic bass in Germany.

In addition to serving as chair of the anthropology department, Professor Beeman maintains faculty affiliations with the Center for Cognitive Sciences and the program in Second Language Studies. He is a world-renowned expert on the Middle East, the Gulf Region, and Central Asia and has published dozens of works on myriad subjects, such as Iranian performance traditions, the neurobiology of opera, and language and identity politics. He served for several years as the secretary of the American Association of University Professors

(AAUP), and the president of the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association. He also speaks over ten languages, including Hindi, Turkish, Bengali, and several European languages.

As with so many other aspects of his career, Beeman demonstrates an enthusiasm for governance that is contagious. He first got involved in governance at Brown University, where he served on the Faculty Executive Committee from 2001-2004. At the University of Minnesota, he served on the Faculty Senate from 2007 to 2013, as well as on the Senate Committee on Faculty Affairs (SCFA) from 2011 to 2013. He is currently serving his second term on the Faculty Senate, from 2014-2017. Known for being unafraid to voice a dissenting opinion, he believes in shared governance because he feels that proper consultation, cooperation and transparency are critical, as is faculty input.

When I ask him what he does in his spare time, he half-jokes that between his duties as professor and department chair and his governance participation, spare time is somewhat elusive. Nevertheless, Beeman continues his singing career, and has also written, directed and produced various plays. Recently, in conjunction with the University of Minnesota Department of Theater Arts and Dance and the Elemental Ensemble, he directed and produced a reading of *It Can't Happen Here*, a play written in 1936 by Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt, which explores life in the U.S. under an authoritarian leader elected on a populist platform.