

Memorial Resolution for Keith Weghorst, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor (continuing track)
December 5, 2023
College of Arts and Science Faculty Meeting

Delivered by Noam Lupu, Associate Professor of Political Science

Keith Weghorst was a beloved instructor and colleague, and a talented scholar of African politics. Born and raised in Memphis, Keith received his B.A. in political science and legal studies (with honors) from Northwestern University in 2006, then went on to earn an M.A. in African Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2008 and then a second M.A. and Ph.D. in political science at the University of Florida in 2011 and 2015. Keith came to Vanderbilt as a predoctoral fellow in 2013, becoming a postdoctoral fellow in 2015 and an Assistant Professor (continuing track) in 2016. He had been slated to begin a tenure-track appointment as Assistant Professor at the University of Gothenburg in 2022.

Keith maintained an active and productive research program in comparative politics, focusing on political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa. His most important publication was his book, *Activist Origins of Political Ambition: Opposition Candidacy in Electoral Authoritarian Regimes*, which was published by Cambridge University Press in 2022. The book identifies why opposition candidates seek office in electoral authoritarian regimes despite the unfair political environment they face and the personal risks associated with regime opposition. Using data collected through three years of fieldwork in Tanzania, Keith demonstrates that individuals' prior experiences with civic activism and party organizations are key determinants in their choice to take on these risks and seek office. The book is already proving to be influential in the study of electoral authoritarianism, political selection, and African politics.

In addition to his book, Keith published influential studies on voting behavior and party politics in Africa, as well as important work on survey research methodology. He was in the process of working with a collaborator to collect systematic data from African legislators on the role that nongovernmental organizations play in fostering political careers and in mediating the relationships between representatives and their constituencies.

Keith was a gifted teacher and worked hard to connect with his students, constantly innovating in his pedagogy. Combining two of his biggest interests, he created a popular course on Music and Politics that engaged and inspired Vanderbilt students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, his enormous efforts to make online teaching work earned him a COVID-19 Award for Teaching Innovation from the College. He also received the Robert Birkby Undergraduate Teaching Award from the department in 2021. Most importantly, his teaching reflected his enormous heart and charismatic personality, challenging his students while also making his classroom fun and inclusive. These hallmarks of his teaching emerged organically when considering the feedback that Keith received from his course evaluations. In the fall of 2020, when Vanderbilt students returned to find a campus in the throes of the pandemic, a student in his Political Parties "W" course offered the following comments on the class:

“Prof. Weghorst is one of the rare professors who balances challenging you academically while also making you feel like he genuinely cares about you as a person, not just as a student. He understands the greater context of our lives right now and always made me feel understood.”

Another student in that same class wrote:

“I loved this course. Professor Weghorst brought great energy to these difficult times and was a reassuring presence. I was very grateful for my in-class experience and glad it was this class out of all of them. It was truly a key component to improving my overall learning experience this semester.”

Outside the classroom, Keith was a model citizen in the discipline. He was a chief architect of a successful Trans-Institutional Program called *Africa at a Crossroads*, which developed an undergraduate Minor, awarded research grants, and coordinated numerous campus events related to African society and politics—including an African food day in the dining halls. He was an active member of the executive committee of the African Politics section of the American Political Science Association, raising funds and establishing mechanisms to support both African scholars and junior scholars. And he served the broader academic and policymaking communities with numerous policy papers and expert assessments for organizations like Freedom House, USAID, and the Varieties of Democracy Institute.

An avid runner and traveler, Keith had a generous spirit and an exuberant personality. He was well-known around the department for his desire and amazing ability to make people smile. Halloween was always an event in political science, when Keith would dress up in incredible—and shockingly accurate—costumes, including one year when he was the spitting image of professional wrestler Randy “Macho Man” Savage; walking the hallways and knocking on doors intermittently, to see his colleagues’ reactions to his outfits. Among the many things that we lost as a community with the onset of COVID was that we weren’t able to see what Keith was going to be dressed up as that year, in his earnest quest to give his students and colleagues some much-appreciated laughs.

Just days before moving to take up his new position in Europe, Keith was diagnosed with an acute form of leukemia. He spent the next eight months in treatment at Vanderbilt, ever the optimist, always ready with a smile and a joke. His loss at such a young age, still in the early stages of a promising scholarly career, came as a shock. He is sorely missed by his many Vanderbilt colleagues and friends.

Keith is survived by his wife, fellow political scientist Kristin Michelitch, and his daughters, Josephine Moto and Margot Moyo.