



## Reflecting on the Legacy of Dr. Liz Cummins

Dr. Elizabeth Cummins Vonalt, professor of English, devoted more than three decades of her career to Missouri S&T, helping shape the Department of English and Technical Communication (ETC) and establishing lasting standards for mentorship, scholarship, and inclusion. A year after Cummins's passing at age 85 in November 2024, Dr. Kate Drowne, professor of English and assistant provost for faculty affairs, reflects on her friend, colleague, and mentor's legacy.

Dr. Cummins joined the university in 1967 and later became the first woman to chair an academic department at the University of Missouri–Rolla (now

Missouri S&T), leading the Department of English from 1990 to 1999. Her leadership reflected both her commitment to her discipline and her sustained work to build a more inclusive campus community.

### **Advocacy, Inclusion, and Institutional Change**

Cummins's commitment to inclusion emerged early in her career. When she arrived on campus as an adjunct lecturer in the late 1960s, several university buildings lacked women's restrooms. She mapped restroom locations and shared them with new female faculty—a small, practical act that signaled both the realities of being a woman on the UMR campus and her intention to make conditions better for others.

As department chair throughout the 1990s, she worked to ensure that a wider range of voices was represented. Colleagues recall that she consistently encouraged participation, visibility, and opportunity. As Drowne notes, “She was one of those people who didn’t just mentor; she sponsored. She made sure others were seen, included, and given opportunities.”

The university recognized “her commitment to students and her dedication to diversity” in 1997 by naming her the first recipient of UMR’s Woman of the Year Award. As the 2024 group photo shows, she became a cherished presence at each annual ceremony, serving as a role model and inspiration for women faculty on campus.

Even after her retirement in the early 2000s, Cummins continued to support community-building efforts. In 2007, she helped organize “Women Advancing Excellence at UMR,” a day-long event designed to highlight the contributions of women faculty and strengthen their visibility. “It created a sense of belonging,” Drowne recalled. “That was always her goal.”

Her advocacy extended into her work with retirees as well. From 2012 to 2014, she served as the first woman president of the Miner Retirees Association and represented the campus within the University of Missouri System Retirees Leadership Association.

Dr. Elizabeth Cummins (center, seated) is surrounded by previous UMR/S&T Woman of the Year Award recipients at the Spring 2024 ceremony. Cummins was the university’s first Woman of the Year in 1997.



Her influence also endures through programs she helped inspire. Created in 2017, the Dr. Elizabeth Cummins Women’s Advocate Award recognizes employees, regardless of gender, who demonstrate mentorship, advocacy, and leadership in support of women at S&T. “That award captures her perfectly,” Drowne said. “It celebrates people who connect others, open doors, and make sure no one’s left behind.”

In 2025, Missouri S&T administratively suspended the award in response to the U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi’s July 29 memo, “Guidance for Recipients of Federal Funding Regarding Unlawful Discrimination.” The suspension reflected procedural compliance rather than any change in the importance of the work the award recognized.

### **Education, Research, Teaching, and Leadership**

Before beginning her long career at Missouri S&T, Cummins earned an associate’s degree from Cottey College in 1958, a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of South Dakota in 1960, and a master’s degree in English from the same institution in 1962. She completed her Ph.D. in English at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign in 1985, focusing her dissertation on the works of Ursula K. Le Guin.

Her scholarship on Ursula K. Le Guin began well before her doctorate and helped shape the emerging academic study of Le Guin’s work. Beginning in the late 1970s, under the last name “Cogell,” she published some of the earliest peer-reviewed articles treating Le Guin as a major literary figure, work she continued in her 1985 dissertation. She went on to produce both a comprehensive scholarly bibliography, *Ursula K. Le Guin: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (1983), and a critical study, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin* (1993), each of which became standard references for students and scholars. Her later bibliography of Judith Merrill (2007) extended this line of scholarship to another foundational writer in science fiction. Together, these

publications helped establish and organize serious academic attention to authors who would become central to the field.

Her enthusiasm for teaching science fiction resonated strongly with students across the university. “Her science fiction courses always filled very quickly,” said Drowne. “She loved talking with colleagues and especially students about the writers she taught, especially Le Guin. She even named her cat, Irian, after a character in one of Le Guin’s stories. Students loved the energy that Dr. Cummins brought to her classrooms.”

As chair of the Department of English and Technical Communication from 1990 to 1999, she played an instrumental role in hiring two ETC faculty members who are still teaching: Dr. Ed Malone in 1993 and Dr. Kris Swenson in 1997. By hiring the late Dr. Linda Bergmann in 1996, she advanced the department’s plan to establish the university’s Writing Across the Curriculum program, which in turn led to the development of a writing center, now called the Writing and Communication Center.

In the early 2000s, as a senior faculty member, Cummins continued to mentor and support ETC colleagues, including Drowne, who joined the department in 2002. Her mentoring philosophy emphasized empathy and balance. “She made it okay to be a parent, a scholar, and a person all at once,” Drowne said, recalling how Cummins encouraged young faculty to bring their children to the department when childcare was limited. “She taught us that being excellent at your job doesn’t mean closing yourself off from being human.”

As professor emerita, Cummins volunteered her time to support faculty careers, serving on several full-professor promotion committees, which meet a year before the promotion takes effect. She chaired Malone’s committee in 2014 and was a member of Drowne’s in 2015, Dr. Trent Brown’s in 2016, and Dr. David Wright’s in 2020.



Professors Liz Cummins and Larry Vonalt at a department Halloween party in 2003.

Her support for students continued as well. During her retirement, she served as a member of the thesis committee of M.S. student Elizabeth Roberson and took an especially active role in mentoring her as she researched and wrote “The History of Technical Communication Instruction at Missouri University of Science and Technology: The Evolution of a Curriculum” (2011). Roberson later joined the ETC faculty as a teaching professor.

Her commitment to students endures through two Larry P. Vonalt Scholarships, each awarded to a bachelor’s or master’s student in technical communication. Before she divided and renamed the fund, the original scholarship carried her name as well. Her husband, Dr. Larry Vonalt, also a professor of English, worked with her in the early 2000s to

create the department’s undergraduate and graduate degree programs in technical communication, which launched in January 2005 as complements to the English B.A. Those programs have now been in place for more than 20 years and have graduated over 200 students.

#### **A Humanist Through and Through**

Cummins strengthened Missouri S&T by supporting colleagues, guiding students, expanding the curriculum, and championing inclusion long before it had institutional language. Her steady, practical work helped others find a place in the university’s story.

“She was a humanist through and through,” Drowne said. “She believed that everyone belonged in the story.”