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A Brief History of the Atkinson Presidency (1995 - 2003)

By Patricia A. Pelfrey

Richard C. Atkinson led the University of California into the post-affirmative action era and American education into a new chapter in the history of standardized testing as seventeenth president of the nation's leading multicampus system. His eight-year tenure was marked by innovative approaches to admissions and outreach, research initiatives to accelerate the University's contributions to the state's economy, and a challenge to the country's most widely used admissions examination—the SAT I—that paved the way to major change in how millions of young Americans will be tested for college admission.

As the University heads into a new and difficult budgetary climate, the Atkinson years will be remembered as a time of great growth and prosperity, a period in which UC's State-funded budget rose to new highs and federal research funding and private giving regularly set new records. The University named the founding chancellor for UC Merced, its first new campus in 30 years and the first American research university of the twenty-first century. It established several new professional schools and initiated growth in its graduate programs with a plan for the addition of 11,000 graduate students over the next decade. Eight of the University's ten current chancellors were appointed during Atkinson's presidency.

UC expanded its national presence with a new center in Washington, D.C. and its international reach with centers in London and Mexico City. The California Digital Library, a pioneering effort to make the University's vast collections more accessible to scholars and the public and to encourage new forms of scholarly communication, reflected the University's leadership in the evolving world of digital telecommunications.

Atkinson's highest priority was maintaining the distinction of UC's 7,000-member faculty. The academic excellence of the University and its faculty was recognized in several national studies of academic program quality, one of which noted "the extraordinary research performance of the entire University of California system" among American universities, public and private. UC's membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities—six of its nine general campuses—exceeds that of any other multicampus system. Eleven UC faculty members were awarded Nobel Prizes during Atkinson's tenure, more than under any other UC president.

As chancellor of UC San Diego from 1980 to 1995—during which the young campus rose to rank tenth among American research universities—Atkinson combined driving energy and a gift for persuasion with an unswerving pursuit of his goals. As president of the UC System, he attacked the University's greatest opportunities and most intractable problems with the same persistent vigor.

Atkinson faced his share of crises and controversies, among them an early and public disagreement with some members of the Board of Regents over the implementation date of SP-1, the ban on racial preferences in UC admissions. UCSF Stanford Healthcare, the merger of the clinical enterprises of UC San Francisco and Stanford University, was an historic but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to address the competitive pressures of the health-care marketplace. Dealing with the fallout of California's sudden transition from prosperity to recession has confronted the University with painful choices. And UC's administration of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) laboratory at Los Alamos has come under fire in recent years, resulting in a decision by DOE to put the laboratory's management contract up for competition when it expires in 2005.

But the issues that dominated the Atkinson administration were the issues shaping California: the state's emergence as the world's leading knowledge-based economy and the rapidly growing size and diversity of its population, which brought the first of the largest student generation since the 1960s to the University's door. Atkinson's administrative and intellectual leadership of the University reflected a deliberate effort to define UC's role in this changing California.

SP-1 and UC outreach

His earliest and greatest challenge was in the contentious arena of UC admissions. He was named president in August 1995, just weeks after the Board of Regents voted to approve SP-1, which abolished the use of race and ethnicity as factors in admission and put UC in the national spotlight as the first major American university to end affirmative action in the admission of students. The ban on racial preferences was extended to all public entities in California sixteen months later with the passage of Proposition 209.

For UC's president and chancellors, SP-1 and Proposition 209 were an exacting test of leadership in reversing three decades of race-attentive policies while also ensuring that UC, as a public university in the nation's most diverse state, continued to be seen as a welcoming place for minority students.

Under Atkinson's leadership, the University dramatically expanded its partnerships with the K-12 schools to raise academic achievement throughout California, especially in those districts with high proportions of academically disadvantaged students. In 2001, the school/university partnerships served more than 97,000 students in 256 schools annually, representing a level of institutional involvement unprecedented in American higher education. At Governor Gray Davis's request and as part of his school reform initiative, the University established the Principal Leadership Institute, the California Professional Development Institutes, and a series of other initiatives to improve the preparation of California's teachers and K-12 administrators.

Eight years after the passage of SP-1, UC is admitting more underrepresented students—Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans—than it was in 1997, the year before SP-1 took effect. In fall 1997, underrepresented minorities made up 18.8 percent of UC's systemwide freshman class; in fall 2003, the figure is 19.8 percent.

With Atkinson's support, The Regents voted to rescind SP-1 in May 2001. The Board's resolution affirmed the University's intent to continue complying with Proposition 209's ban on racial preferences and reaffirmed UC's commitment to enrolling a student body that reflects both exceptional achievement and "the broad diversity of backgrounds characteristic of California."

Research for a dynamic economy

Atkinson came to the UC presidency convinced that twenty-first century science requires new forms of organization and funding. In particular, his goal was to tap the enormous potential within the University for research that serves the needs of California's economy. One of his first acts as president was to establish the Industry-University Cooperative Research Program (IUCRP) to promote research partnerships with industry in disciplines critical to the state's economic competitiveness. The IUCRP is now a \$250 million enterprise that supports more than 500 projects, jointly supported by State, UC, and industry funds, in areas ranging from biotechnology to digital media. The program is unusual in its emphasis on early-stage investigations that promise to yield new products and technologies and boost the state's economic productivity.

To address a looming crisis in the state's supply of engineers and computer scientists, in 1997 Atkinson committed the University to increasing enrollments in those fields 50 percent by 2005-6. UC exceeded this goal in 2002, four years ahead of schedule, and expects engineering and computer science enrollments to reach 27,000 in 2003-2004—up from 16,000 in 1997-98. The initiative represents the first real growth in the state's engineering programs since the 1968 Terman Report brought expansion of engineering education in California to a virtual halt.

Governor Davis, also a believer in the dynamic role of innovative research in ensuring California's economic leadership, has been an enthusiastic supporter of the University's efforts. In 2000, he asked UC to establish four California Institutes for Science and Innovation (CISIs) on its campuses. The institutes bring together industry and university researchers to concentrate on scientific challenges that are ripe for application in the fields of nanotechnology, telecommunications and information technology, biotechnology and quantitative medicine, and information technology. The CISIs constitute one of the most far-reaching efforts in the nation to create new basic research and education programs and then to link them with the state's entrepreneurial industries through intensive partnerships. They are unique among industry-university initiatives in their aim to create the economy of the future.

Tidal Wave II and UC admissions policy

Another challenge of the Atkinson era was preparing the University for a new generation of students—Tidal Wave II, the children of the Baby Boomers. Accommodating its share of Tidal Wave II meant finding a place on UC campuses for 63,000 additional students—an enrollment increase of 40 percent--and recruiting 7,000 new faculty between 1998 and 2010. Atkinson initiated a comprehensive planning effort to help the University grow quickly without endangering its quality.

The Atkinson presidency was notable for its intense focus on the issue of educational opportunity, a matter of increasing public and legislative scrutiny because of SP-1 and growing competition for admission to UC. Atkinson

played an active role in reshaping UC's admissions policies and practices to make them, in his words, "demonstrably inclusive and fair." On his recommendation, the University's Academic Senate and The Regents approved two new paths to admission—Eligibility in the Local Context and the Dual Admissions program. Both programs cast a wider net for talent by supplementing traditional grades and test scores with broader measures of student achievement, among them what students have made of their opportunities to learn. In addition, undergraduate applicants now receive the kind of comprehensive review of their qualifications usually associated with selective private universities.

Achievement versus aptitude

Atkinson has earned a place in the annals of standardized testing for his challenge to higher education's decades-long reliance on aptitude tests to predict students' readiness for college. He made national headlines in February 2001 when he told the American Council on Education that he had asked the Academic Senate of the University of California to drop the SAT I examination requirement in favor of tests that assess what students actually learn in school rather than "ill-defined notions of aptitude." The announcement that the country's largest user of the SAT was considering eliminating it sent shock waves through American higher education, and Atkinson's case for achievement tests—that they are more reliable predictors of future success, fairer to students, and better guides for schools—unleashed a lively national debate on standardized testing.

In June 2002 the College Board, sponsor of the SAT, announced that beginning in 2005 it would add a written essay and more rigorous mathematics section to the 76-year-old test. Atkinson welcomed the decision and praised the College Board for having "laid the foundation for a new test that will better serve our students and schools."

The Atkinson years

The University's seventeenth president will be remembered for his absolute commitment to faculty quality, his skill in balancing UC's competing pressures and responsibilities, and his resourcefulness in using the opportunities prosperity offered to urge the University in new directions. "The role of knowledge in transforming virtually every aspect of our world has moved research universities to center stage of American life," he once said, a conviction that has animated the leadership he brought to the University as chancellor and as president. His place in the history of the University of California and of American higher education is secure.

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