

# UC Office of the President

## The Atkinson Presidency

### **Title**

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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2nx02710>

### **ISBN**

978-0-520-25199-1

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### **Publication Date**

2007-05-01

# A Brief History of the Atkinson Presidency

*1995–2003*

The issues that dominated the administration of Richard C. Atkinson grew out of the forces shaping California: the state's emergence as the world's leading knowledge-based economy and the rapidly expanding size and diversity of its population, which brought 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 U.C.'s role in this changing California.

Atkinson led the University into the post-affirmative-action era and American education into a new chapter in the history of standardized testing as the 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 are tested for college admission.

The Atkinson years will be remembered as a time of great growth and prosperity, a period during which U.C.'s state-funded budget rose to historic highs and federal research funding and private giving regularly set new records. The University named the founding chancellor for U.C. Merced, its first new campus in forty years. It established several new professional schools and initiated growth in its graduate programs with a plan for the addition of eleven thousand graduate students by 2010. Nine University chancellors were appointed during Atkinson's presidency.

The University of California also expanded its national presence with a new center in Washington, D.C., and its international reach with centers in London and Mexico City. The establishment of 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 principal priority was maintaining the distinction of U.C.'s seven-thousand-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.<sup>1</sup> The membership of six out of nine U.C. general campuses in the prestigious Association of American Universities exceeds that of any other multicampus system. Eleven U.C.

faculty members were awarded Nobel Prizes during Atkinson's tenure, more than under any other U.C. president.

As chancellor of U.C. San Diego from 1980 to 1995, during which time 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 U.C. System, he attacked the University's problems and opportunities 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 using race and ethnicity as factors in U.C. admission. UCSF Stanford Healthcare, the merger of the clinical enterprises of U.C. San Francisco and Stanford University, was a historic but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to address the competitive pressures of the health-care marketplace. California's sudden transition from prosperity to recession toward the end of Atkinson's tenure confronted the University with painful choices. And U.C.'s administration of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) laboratory at Los Alamos, New Mexico, came under fire in 2000, resulting in a decision by DOE to put the laboratory's management contract up for competitive bidding in 2005. In the end, however, U.C.'s bid for renewal of its contract with DOE was successful.

#### SP-1 AND U.C. OUTREACH

Atkinson's earliest and greatest challenge was in the contentious arena of U.C. admissions. He was named president in August 1995. A month earlier, the Board of Regents had approved SP-1,

which put U.C. in the national spotlight. The ban on racial preferences was extended to all public entities in California sixteen months later with the passage of Proposition 209.

For U.C.'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 U.C., 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 guidance, 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. At Governor Gray Davis's request, and as part of Davis's school reform initiative, the University established the Principal Leadership Institutes, the California Professional Development Institutes, and a series of other initiatives to improve the preparation of California's teachers and K-12 administrators.

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 while reaffirming U.C.'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 U.C. 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 280-million-dollar enterprise that supports nearly six hundred projects, jointly supported by state, U.C., and industry funds, in areas ranging from biotechnology to digital media.

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 2005–06. U.C. exceeded this goal in 2002, four years ahead of schedule, and engineering and computer science enrollments exceeded twenty-seven thousand in 2003–04, up from sixteen thousand in 1997–98. The initiative represents the first real growth in the state's engineering programs since the 1968 Terman Report, whose conclusion that California had an oversupply of programs and facilities in the field brought the expansion of engineering education to a virtual halt.<sup>2</sup>

Governor Davis was an enthusiastic supporter of the University's efforts. In 2000, he asked U.C. 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. 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 a state's entrepreneurial industries through intensive partnerships. To honor President Atkinson's

role in the establishment of the institutes and his service to the University, the building that houses the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calitz) on the U.C. San Diego campus has been designated Atkinson Hall.

#### TIDAL WAVE II AND U.C. 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 U.C. campuses for sixty-three thousand additional students—an enrollment increase of 40 percent—and recruiting thousands of new faculty members 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 U.C. Atkinson played an active part in reshaping U.C.'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 several new paths to admission. The purpose of these new approaches was to supplement 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 use of 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." Atkinson's case for achievement tests was that they are more reliable predictors of future success, fairer to students, and better guides for schools in determining the curriculum.

In June 2002, the College Board, the sponsor of the SAT, announced that beginning in 2005 it would add a written essay and a more rigorous mathematics section to the seventy-six-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 U.C.'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. This conviction animated the leadership

he brought to the University of California and to American higher education.

#### NOTES

1. Hugh Davis Graham and Nancy Diamond, *The Rise of American Research Universities: Elites and Challengers in the Postwar Era* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 202.

2. Frederick Terman, "A Study of Engineering Education in California" (Sacramento: Coordinating Council for Higher Education, March 1968). The council, a state agency, is now called the California Postsecondary Education Commission.