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Book review

Entrepreneurial President—Richard Atkinson and the University of California, 1995–2003

By Patricia A. Pelfrey

ISBN: 9780520270800, 250 pp., University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.

Dr. Pat Pelfrey has written a most interesting book on Richard Atkinson, president of the University of California during the last years of the golden century for public universities in the USA. Pelfrey understands Dick Atkinson, no mean task considering his complexities. Indeed, the reader knows after just a few chapters that she recognizes the most intriguing aspects of Atkinson's personality. For example, he seems to some to be simultaneously unusually intelligent and apparently anti-intellectual. In fact, Pelfrey convincingly explains with examples throughout the book that Atkinson was "highly intellectual, but with a distinctly un-academic dislike of verbal dueling".

It is hard to imagine anyone more qualified than Pat Pelfrey to write this book. She is an English literature and composition expert by PhD education, but a University of California (UC) presidents expert from 40 years of career and profession, going back to President Charles Hitch in 1970. That expertise is apparent throughout the book. In addition, Pelfrey has written *A Brief History of the University of California*.

The author pays special attention to three UC transitions in which Atkinson played major roles: the move of the UC into the post-affirmative action age; the expansion of the research enterprise into collaborations with the private sector; and the move away from the intimate relationships with Los Alamos and Livermore National Weapons Laboratories. The three areas are well-chosen. One finishes the book feeling that while it is not a complete biography or history, when the last page is read, you have little doubt that you now better understand what motivated Dick Atkinson.

SP-1, SP-2. Pelfrey begins her book with what is easily the clearest and most inclusive discussion of the passage of SP-1 and SP-2 so far published. "On July 20, 1995, the Board of Regents of the University of California rolled back thirty years of history by abolishing the use of racial and ethnic preferences in admissions and employment. The two resolutions approved by the board, SP-1 (on admissions) and SP-2 (on employment and purchasing), passed by a narrow margin after a long and exhausting day of regental maneuvering and unsuccessful attempts at compromise".

More important, she catches the almost daily drama of how they were to be implemented within the university's cycles, which were 2 years long in the case of SP-1 (Chapter 3). During the frequent bouts of brouhaha even John Davies, arguably the wisest of the regents of the day, told Atkinson that "his job was on the line" if he did not conform to Governor Wilson's way of thinking on the matter. Of this Pelfrey leaves no doubt. "Wilson was outraged" (p. 44). "Wilson was angrier than ever" (p. 45). "A frustrated Wilson slammed his pencil down..." (p. 69). Pelfrey's description exactly describes the tension and tone of the debate.

Again, there is no better description to be found of these tumultuous years; Pelfrey's book is worth the price of purchase for these chapters alone. Pelfrey describes the Regents' eventual rescission of SP-1 and SP-2 in May 2001 this way: "Its demise was as steeped in political drama as its birth". Perhaps, but I watched it all first hand and I wonder if this issue deserved the amount of coverage Pelfrey gave it. Neither the Regents nor the Chancellors had any inclination to violate Proposition 209. To be sure, there were some interesting spin-offs of this sometimes noisy debate, like Eligibility in the Local Context, but they were not major in the scheme of things.

But, no matter, there is much more in the book. Atkinson was the first UC chancellor to fully comprehend the effects of the Bayh-Dole Act on university research efforts. He saw the future and benefits of university partnerships with the private sector. That San Diego (SD) was in certain need of such partnerships at this time in its economic evolution did not hurt the effort. However, it took a strong-minded, confident chancellor to push these cooperations and collaborations through a wary faculty Senate.

Furthermore, as president he saw the wisdom of his predecessor President Gardner's previous stand-off with the Department of Energy over the issue of managing the National Laboratories. This is a major issue in the book, covered thoroughly owing to Pelfrey's careful research on the events leading to the changes in the relationship between UC and the National Laboratories.

The SAT 1 Examination. Was Atkinson a chancellor's president? Undoubtedly. From where, though, did this "management principle" come? Strong memories of what he did *not* like as Chancellor at UCSD were likely more influential than any carefully parsed value affecting campus governance. As chancellor at UCSD he did not like "the visit from a constituent who pulled out a letter Atkinson had written to him, pointed at the president's name at the top of the letterhead, and demanded to see that person, 'the one who is really in charge'".

More substantively, he was not impressed with any altruism that might have been associated with indirect costs – dollars that were distributed according to a vice-president's notion of need, rather than according to which campus generated those dollars. Those matters of symbolism and substance had to be changed

to more directly benefit the campuses, thought Atkinson, and he made them happen once he became president.

On the other hand, Atkinson did not hesitate to take presidential responsibility for his actions, especially when he was confident that nobody knew more about the matter than he did. The best example of this was his Atwell lecture to the American Council on Education, during which he made significant declarations regarding the SAT 1 examination. He was unimpressed with the notion that the SAT 1 was a true measure of intelligence, and he was frustrated that many academics “seemed oddly unaware of several recent studies that had challenged the superiority of aptitude tests in predicting first-year college grades”. Atkinson cogitated on the opinions of the day, but finally, Pelfrey describes, “His position as President of the UC, the major user of the SAT, and his credentials as a cognitive scientist made him one of the few individuals in the country who could challenge the powerful College Board on this issue”. And so he did, in his Atwell Distinguished Lecture before the ACE. The reaction was immediate and it reverberated worldwide. “He was most concerned about making the big splash”, said Bob Laird, a former admissions director at UC Berkeley. Anyone who knew Atkinson well, and we chancellors did, dismissed that contention out of hand. We never saw Atkinson do anything just for the sake of “making a big splash”.

Atkinson did not discuss his views about the SAT I very much at all with the chancellors, and we would not have expected anything different. Atkinson knew this issue well, perhaps better than anyone in the world. He was not likely to waste time on a Council of Chancellors agenda soliciting our insights.

Pelfrey’s thoroughly researched review of this SAT matter tells the reader so much about Atkinson’s presidential work. Generally the issues he took to himself were handled courageously, and always, as he has said, without any worry “about getting fired... I’ve always sort of taken the view that I’m going to do what has to be done on a reasonable basis. If it doesn’t work out, I’m happy to take the consequences”.

Atkinson never seemed entirely comfortable sitting at the head of the table at Council of Chancellors meetings. He was much more at ease cracking wise from his former UCSD chancellor’s chair. The chancellors, though, always felt that he belonged at the head. He quickly became a highly respected leader of the UC. Pat Pelfrey’s ruminations and considerations without ever being ingratiating make it clear that there is little doubt that time and history will continue to treat Dick Atkinson well.

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