

Atkinson set to step down from UC helm

By Eleanor Yang

First encounters with Richard C. Atkinson are often memorable.

Don Tuzin, a young UC San Diego professor, met him shortly after Atkinson became university chancellor. Tuzin, an anthropologist, prepared for weeks for the session, organizing an agenda and scripting his talking points.

He quickly learned that no one sets the agenda for Atkinson except Atkinson.

Tuzin recalls entering the office, greeting Atkinson and moving toward a chair.

"Don't sit down," Atkinson answered, raising his hand as a stop sign. "You're not staying long."

Impatient and blunt, Atkinson has defined his career with his penetrating drive to accomplish tasks, particularly difficult and daring ones. Next week, the energetic 74-year-old will step down after heading the University of California system for eight years, making him the fifth-longest-serving UC president.

During a distinguished career, first as chancellor at the University of California San Diego for 15 years, then as UC president, Atkinson reshaped UC admissions, expanded access to the prestigious 10-campus system and shepherded UCSD through one of its greatest periods of growth.

His feats are all the more remarkable considering that Atkinson never wanted to be an administrator. Renowned as a cognitive psychologist and co-author, with his wife, Rita, of what some consider the bible of psychology textbooks, Atkinson says he sometimes regrets not having stuck with research.

"When I see some of my friends from the earlier period of my life who have remained productive and done exciting work, I sometimes wonder if they had not chosen the right path," Atkinson said recently from behind the desk of his Oakland office, where books sat packed away in boxes.

"But one doesn't make these choices; they just sort of happen."

Stepping in at crisis time

The pivotal moment came in the summer of 1975, when Sen. Ted Kennedy, with the backing of Congress, asked Atkinson to be deputy director at the National Science Foundation. What was supposed to be a one-year stint stretched to five, when he had to deal with the discovery that the agency had misspent public funds.

If one theme runs through Atkinson's life, it's how he has had the misfortune (or fortune) of stepping into positions at times of crisis, or at times ripe with opportunity.

During Atkinson's 15 years at UCSD, the La Jolla campus was transformed from a small, provincial school to a top recipient of federal research money, boasting top-notch faculty and innovative collaboration with business.

Most of his ideas were resisted, yet today the campus abounds with examples of his

bold vision: the Price Center, a student center opposed for commercializing the campus; the Institute of the Americas, built despite faculty concerns over its autonomy; and RIMAC – the Recreation, Intramural, Athletic & Event Center – criticized as too costly.

"It took someone with Dick's courage to say, 'We need to do this,' " said Tuzin, Atkinson's associate chancellor in the early 1990s.

Atkinson had a memorable start as University of California president, considered one of the most influential platforms in higher-education policy.

He arrived during a heated debate on affirmative action, just weeks after regents abolished the consideration of race and ethnicity in admissions.

Under his leadership, UC responded with strategies to broaden access. It revamped its admissions process to consider personal accomplishments as well as academic qualifications, began admitting the top 4 percent of students from every high school in the state, and expanded its partnerships with schools serving youths from kindergarten through 12th grade to raise academic achievement.

He began preparations for the next generation of students: the children of the baby boomers, who are expected to increase UC enrollment by 40 percent. Atkinson set the wheels in motion for the first new campus to open in 30 years, UC Merced, in 2005.

Time and again, Atkinson quickly dealt with conflicts, often by making sure the right person was in place to address them. He has been praised for his appointments, including eight of the 10 chancellors who run the UC campuses. And, with the help of his long-trusted senior vice president, Bruce Darling, he defused criticism over security problems at the laboratories that UC manages for the Department of Energy.

"He's a very good judge of people and places," said Cecil Lytle, a UCSD provost. "I've watched this man for 27 years, and he's a wizard at understanding situations."

Being a risk-taker

Atkinson's tendency toward devising bold solutions makes for dramatic results.

"If you're going to be effective, you have to be prepared to lose your job," he said. "If every move and every action is designed not to create problems, to ensure that your job is safe, you're just not going to be able to do the things that have to be done."

An example of this philosophy was his audacious proposal in 2001 to drop the SAT in college admissions. He contended that the test prompts students to practice word games and math puzzles at the expense of studying biology and poetry.

It was the essence of his daring spirit: challenging the hundreds of colleges that relied on the test and taking on a \$100 million SAT-coaching industry.

"Everyone knew it was going to be highly controversial," said Darling, one of the few Atkinson consulted before making the proposal. "He'd often say, laughingly, 'I don't have to worry about another job because this is a time in life when I can actually do this.' "

The initial reaction was shock. But after appearing on network talk shows and building his case, Atkinson joined forces with Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, which owns the SAT. He helped develop a new test that reflects high school curricula; it will be unveiled in 2005.

"This is the most important change to the SAT made in history, and Dick Atkinson was a real catalyst," Caperton said.

Political acumen

Atkinson is the rare combination of a grandfatherly type, absent-minded and low-key, and an adroit politician, brilliant and charming.

He has been praised and criticized in his dealings with the Legislature.

"Atkinson really distinguished himself in developing excellent relationships with two governors," UC administrator V. Wayne Kennedy said, referring to Pete Wilson and Gray Davis.

Others wonder if Atkinson was too deferential to the political process.

"If you step back and look at the autonomy of the University of California, we have lost a lot of ground," regent Ward Connerly said. "The state Legislature has a lot to do with our activities, and it's disproportionate to the money we get from it."

Cuts in state funding – beyond the \$410 million this year – are the greatest challenge facing Atkinson's successor, UCSD Chancellor Robert Dynes. Without additional state money, UC may be unable to accept more students next year or deal with growing tide of college-age students. Higher student fees, program cuts and enrollment caps are being discussed.

Some wonder whether the system could have better positioned itself by eliminating more programs during the fiscal crisis in the early 1990s.

"My only disappointment – and this is not Dick's fault – is I wish we had followed up on plans in the early 1990s to have more differentiated, specialized campuses," regent John Davies said. "We can't afford for all the campuses to offer all things."

Atkinson, although worried that a lack of funds will drain UC of its academic excellence, is leaving this beast for Dynes. Meanwhile, he will return to San Diego, where he plans to golf and spend time with his grandchildren.

"I don't want to provide instructions for the next president," Atkinson said, smiling. "I'll just say that I think John Davies makes a good point."

For once, he's no longer driving the agenda.