

CUCEA's Political Plunge

By Charles Berst (UCLA)

The value of CUCEA (the Council of UC Emeriti Associations), and curious twists of academic politics, surfaced dramatically in May 1999 in a meeting of the statewide Academic Senate Assembly at the Irvine campus.

The Assembly's agenda bulged with momentous matters, starting with a weighty report by President Atkinson about greater state support for the University, "stunning growth" in UC's contract and grant activity, the establishment of a commission on the humanities, student housing challenges, TA unionization, library initiatives, instructional technology, increasing graduate enrollments, and the daunting prospect of over 60,000 more students by the year 2012, at which time the new Merced campus will absorb just 5,000.

Fred Spiess, recent vice chair of CUCEA and now chair of the Senate Task Force on UC Merced, reported on academic planning for the new campus; and Robert Anderson, then chair of UC Faculty Welfare, outlined his committee's strategic attention to the University's health care negotiations (in which emeriti interests were closely served by then CUCEA Chair Richard Gable), better disability insurance, child care facilities, tuition waivers for children of faculty, and a closing of gaps in domestic partner benefits.

Such important and complex subjects might well have glutted a dozen Assembly sessions. But they wafted through the meeting as on a spring breeze. Few bees buzzed in faculty bonnets and nary a niggling gnat gnawed or nattered. The Senate's ship seemed to be sailing serenely shoreward. Until it struck a rock.

Well, actually a stone.

Or a pebble.

But like grit in one's shoe, a pea poking a princess, or a molehill mountain, the pebble's mischief surpassed its size. Innocuously tagged "Approval of proposed amendment to Bylaw 55 (Departmental Voting Rights)," it hobbled the proceedings for a full hour.

Merely allowing emeriti the right to receive notices of department personnel meetings and to speak, but not vote, at them, the amendment corrected a bizarre scuttling of this right by a contrary amendment contrived by the Senate's Rules and Jurisdiction Committee in 1993.

When an account of this contrivance surfaced at a CUCEA meeting in 1997, some members doubted that righting the wrong was worth the legislative labors it would involve. For most members, being freed of department meetings, especially those on personnel, was one of the blessings of emerititude. For many, Hell would be a pit of academics doomed for eternity to such meetings. Unless specifically invited by the next generation, why in the devil rattle one's old chains, like Jacob Marley's ghost?

BUT the gathering's sense of honor and principle came to a boil at the suspicion that emeriti rights had been compromised by anti-emeriti bias in a tiny committee. And one machination unchallenged may invite others. So CUCEA decided to pursue the matter.

This time around, Rules and Jurisdiction, with only minor quibbles, found CUCEA's corrective amendment consistent with Senate bylaws. Still, the committee wrote a letter on the side, expressing personal displeasure with it.

Fortunately, this curious behavior was countered in turn by strong votes for the amendment in the Faculty Welfare Committee and the Academic Council, which forwarded it to the Assembly.

There, at last, the amendment was introduced by Robert Anderson, Chair of Faculty Welfare. A model of clarity and low-key thoughtfulness, Anderson reiterated the fact that the proposal did not give emeriti voting rights in departmental personnel actions (unless such rights were granted by a two-thirds vote of active department members). Rather, it gave emeriti the right to notices and materials of meetings, and to speak at the meetings.

For CUCEA, Richard Gable pointed out that since a Regental Standing Order gives emeriti Academic Senate membership and a Senate bylaw gives them departmental membership, the proposed amendment simply restored rights that Rules and Jurisdiction had overridden in 1993.

These benign bells rang clear and true. Like bats in a belfry awakened by them, however, Assembly members' reasoning flew helter-skelter from that moment on: granting voting rights to emeriti gives them too much power in personnel actions; if emeriti cannot vote, why should they see personnel files; how could files remain confidential if emeriti had access to them; emeriti are not really a part of departments (they're meant to depart); this should not be imposed on helpless departments; assistant profs are beset by fear at this threat to them.

Rejoinders emerged amidst the chaos: as eminent professionals, productive scholars, and worthy sources of perspective and institutional memory, emeriti can be a great resource; for example, the chair of the UC Merced Task Force is an emeritus; as opposed to our society, others value wisdom in their seniors; emeriti input broadens diversity; since the three VERIPs, emeriti as a group are younger, longer-lived, and more active in scholarship and university service than ever before.

From pellets of critical rhetoric, it appeared that several divisional Senate chairs had orchestrated opposition to the measure. Combined with scattered concerns of others and the defensive tics of an age-dodging culture, this made its passage by the required two-thirds majority impossible.

Accordingly, politically canny nose-counters tactfully and tactically referred the amendment back to the Academic Council, which CUCEA has subsequently advised to drop the matter lest a compromise result in less congenial emeriti arrangements than some departments now have in effect.

CUCEA will wait for another day and another Assembly. After all, the Senate's short term memory hardly exists and its long term memory is worse. Though the proposal missed a two-thirds vote this time around, it might have eked out a simple majority, and could have succeeded had Faculty Welfare and the Academic Council been voting too. Shelving it avoids a recorded defeat. Other chances will come.

Meanwhile, CUCEA and its constituency have more important pursuits at hand--a wide, vital range of scholarly interests, University and professional service, teaching, travel, and other activities.

The remarkable energies these display are highlighted in a report on CUCEA's recent biobibliographic survey.