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Chronicle Careers<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/08/2008081901c.htm>**HEADS UP****Keep Your Emeriti Close****How can deans and chairs find appropriate ways to involve retired professors in the life of the college?**By GARY A. OLSON

An education dean asked my advice recently about how to "handle" retired professors. I was astonished to learn that she, and apparently some of the department heads at her institution, viewed emeritus faculty members as a nuisance.

"They're like the proverbial bad penny," she told me. "They keep coming back around, and they interfere in departmental business as if they still worked here full time."

She assumed that, since I am a dean, I would share her view, and she hoped I had some remedy. When I explained that my college makes a special effort to embrace our emeritus faculty members and to involve them in the life of the college, she was incredulous.

Former faculty members are a storehouse of historical and procedural knowledge about their departments, colleges, and universities; they often remain active in their disciplines after retirement; many are eager to continue participating in the life of the university; and they often give back to the institution in substantive ways. An institution impoverishes itself when it fails to tap into that wealth of experience.

In fact, keeping your retired professors close can have substantial payoffs. (While some institutions reserve the title of emeritus for a distinguished subset of retirees, other universities, such as my own, use the term to refer to all retired faculty members.)

Many academic departments find ways to accommodate their retirees — by extending departmental mail privileges, setting aside a shared office on the campus, asking them to deliver public lectures or speak to student groups. Many science departments allow active researchers to maintain their laboratories and continue their work well into retirement.

Some colleges publish a regular newsletter for retirees focusing on their recent accomplishments (I like to joke that our retired professors seem more productive than our regular faculty members, but, in some cases, that's not far from the truth).

One department chairman I know has been especially successful in making retired faculty members feel like they still belong to the department. He invites them to all departmental events, often asking them to

serve as guest speakers. Each year he holds a picnic at his home for former faculty members. The provost and dean typically attend as well — a nice way of showing that the top leaders haven't forgotten those faculty members. The event allows retirees to reconnect with one another and the institution.

When a faculty member is about to retire, that same chairman organizes a daylong conference in the retiree's honor. Scholars from the department and from across the country present papers and posters on subjects related to the retiree's area of research. The chairman himself takes photographs throughout the day and assembles an album for the honoree that includes both the photos and texts of the papers. What a fitting tribute to a scholar at the end of a long academic career.

That chairman's efforts have paid off in significant ways for his department. It enjoys an unusually strong sense of community across generations, and many of its emeritus professors have made substantial donations to the department to support student scholarships and a lecture series. Others have given back to the institution by offering to teach courses without compensation.

One way to recognize outstanding emeritus professors and involve them productively in the department or college is to create an emeritus-faculty advisory board.

Four years ago, my college created a board composed of 28 former faculty members that was intended to enhance the relationship between the college and its retirees for the benefit of both. The board "provides the dean with input on current college initiatives; helps narrate the institutional history of the university, particularly the history of the college; and assists in the development of new initiatives for enhancing the retirement experiences of all emeriti faculty."

The board is far from simply a feel-good social group. Its members have led important programs and served as stalwart advocates for their fellow retirees. For example, using college money, the board created a grant program to help pay for students' attendance at professional conferences. In its role as advocate, the board urged the college to intercede on behalf of retirees to persuade the library administration to grant full faculty privileges to emeritus professors rather than, as had been the case, the equivalent of student privileges. The policy was changed.

Because the board members are actively involved in the life of the college, their dedication to the university runs deep. Many board members have made financial donations to the college, including in one case a sizable estate gift.

Institutions can involve emeritus professors in a number of other ways. Each year my college considers retired faculty members for potential induction into our Hall of Fame — an honorary society composed mostly of distinguished alumni.

When I recently informed a retiree that she would be inducted into our college's Hall of Fame, she became teary-eyed and said, "I was among the first women admitted to the professoriate, and every day was a struggle for me and for other women like me around the country. Now, after all those decades, I feel validated, appreciated."

Her commitment to the institution is solid but tempered by a history of lack of recognition. Inducting her into the Hall of Fame crystallized her commitment by helping her realize that despite the challenges she faced as a woman in a male-dominated academic world, the institution values her and her many contributions to its intellectual life.

Every year my college sponsors a luncheon for retired faculty members at which the guests hear updates

about the college and have the opportunity to socialize. It typically draws about 200 people and is among the most popular events we sponsor.

Certainly, the dean who asked for advice on "handling" her retired faculty members had a point: Some professors do interfere in departmental business long after they retire, attempting to exercise control over policies and practices in which they no longer have a stake. As a dean, you need to deal with those folks on an individual basis.

But in my experience, the vast majority of emeritus professors genuinely wish to remain involved in appropriate and productive ways. I, for one, intend to keep them close.

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