

Richard C. Atkinson

Richard C. Atkinson is president emeritus of the University of California and professor emeritus of cognitive science and psychology at the University of California, San Diego. He served as president of the UC system from 1995 to 2003. Before becoming president he served for fifteen years as chancellor of UC San Diego. He is a former director of the National Science Foundation and was a long-term member of the faculty at Stanford University.

An internationally respected scholar and scientist, his tenure as president 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—that paved the way to major changes in the way millions of America's youth are tested for college admissions.

Atkinson became the fifth chancellor of UC San Diego in 1980. During his tenure, the campus doubled in size to about 18,000 students while increasing the distinction of its faculty and breadth of its programs. It consistently placed among the top five universities in federal funding for research. In 1995, the quality of its graduate programs was ranked tenth in the nation by the National Research Council.

Atkinson was appointed deputy director of the National Science Foundation by President Gerald Ford in 1975. When President Jimmy Carter was elected he was promoted to director. At NSF, he had a wide range of responsibilities for science policy at a national and international level, including negotiating the first memorandum of understanding in history between the People's Republic of China and the United States, an agreement for the exchange of scientists and scholars.

Atkinson began his academic career at Stanford University after military service in the U.S. Army. He was a member of the Stanford faculty from 1956 to 1980, except for three years at UCLA and five years at NSF. In addition to serving as professor of psychology at Stanford, he held appointments in the School of Engineering, School of Education, Applied Mathematics and Statistics Laboratories, and Institute for Mathematical Studies in the Social Sciences.

Atkinson's research dealt with problems of memory and cognition. His theory of human memory has been influential in shaping research in the field. It has helped in clarifying the relationship between brain structures and psychological phenomena, in explaining the effects of drugs on memory, and in formulating techniques that optimize the learning process. Atkinson has also been interested in the more applied problems of learning in the classroom. He developed one of the first computer-controlled systems for instruction, which served as a prototype for the commercial development of computer-assisted instruction. Reading instruction under computer control for young school children has been an important application of his work. He was co-founder of the Computer Curriculum Corporation.

Atkinson's scientific contributions have resulted in election to the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Medicine, the National Academy of Education, and the American Philosophical Society. He is past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, former chair of the Association of American Universities, fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, the recipient of numerous honorary degrees, and a mountain in Antarctica has been named in his honor.

His wife, Rita Atkinson, holds a PhD in psychology. Their daughter, Lynn, has an MD degree and is a neurosurgeon.