

## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, ADMISSIONS WARS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA EXAMINED IN NEW BOOK

**March 6, 2012** - Richard C. Atkinson was named president of the University of California in August 1995, just four weeks after the UC Board of Regents voted to end affirmative action in the admission of students. “The Regents’ decision reversed thirty years of history,” explains Patricia A. Pelfrey, author of *Entrepreneurial President: Richard Atkinson and the University of California, 1995-2003*, published by the University of California Press. “And it made Richard Atkinson the first UC president in decades to face the conflict between the California Master Plan’s goal of broad educational access and UC’s high academic standards without the tool of affirmative action.”

UC’s often stormy transition to the post-affirmative action age was his first major task as president. Pelfrey’s new book looks at this and other defining issues of Atkinson’s eight-year presidency: UC’s expansion into new forms of scientific research with industry; Atkinson’s much-publicized challenge to the nation’s dominant college-entrance examination, the SAT; and the prolonged controversy over the University’s management of the national nuclear weapons research laboratories at Los Alamos and Livermore, ignited by the 1999 arrest of Los Alamos nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee on charges of espionage.

“My goal in this book is to lay out the landscape of the Atkinson years as a seminal period in UC history,” Pelfrey notes, “including what could be called the underlying currents of his tenure—his role in the evolving relationship between presidents and chancellors in the ten-campus system and administrative changes he introduced that altered the architecture of UC governance.”

Atkinson was in some respects an unusual UC president. He was the first to have been an academic entrepreneur, the founder of a private company based on his pioneering research into cognition, learning, and computer-assisted instruction as a faculty member at Stanford University in the 1960s and 1970s. A former director of the National Science Foundation, he spent fifteen years (1980-1995) as chancellor of UC San Diego, where he encouraged campus research partnerships with industry to build the San Diego region’s high-tech economy. Pelfrey’s account of this phase of his career, writes UC Santa Cruz chancellor emeritus Karl S. Pister in his foreword to the book, “reads like a handbook for aspiring new research university presidents.”

One of the paradoxes of an administration that began with a governance crisis is that in a number of ways the Atkinson era seemed to exemplify what former UC president Clark Kerr meant in describing the twentieth century as unusually hospitable to academic enterprises. “Despite the challenges, it was a time of growth, expansion, and optimism for UC,” Pelfrey says. “The University named the founding chancellor of UC Merced, its tenth campus, and UC’s place as a

leader among research universities was underscored by independent national studies demonstrating the remarkably high quality of academic programs throughout the system.”

The political and demographic stresses that set the stage for the Atkinson administration still remain today, intensified by the plunge in state funding for California public higher education generally. *Entrepreneurial President* concludes with some reflections on the University’s evolution and future.

“This engaging book is blessed with a special chemistry,” said Berkeley professor emeritus Neil J. Smelser, a leading sociologist and analyst of American higher education. “It is, first, a revealing story of one of the most intelligent, adaptive, and creative leaders in the history of the University of California. It is, second, a superb account of the knottiest problems—affirmative action, relations with the national laboratories, for example—faced by the university during the Atkinson presidency. It is, third, remarkably enriched by Patricia Pelfrey’s talents, long experience, keen judgment, and objectivity as the storyteller.”

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*Entrepreneurial President* is available at  
<http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520270800>

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