

President Richard C. Atkinson
University of Chicago Alumni Medal

June 7, 2003

It is always a wonderful experience to return to the University of Chicago. The campus was beautiful when I first set eyes upon it in 1944, and even with all the changes, it is still one of the most beautiful and inspiring campuses in the world.

My decision to enroll at the University of Chicago was by pure happenstance. Both of my parents were immigrants to the United States. Neither had much formal education and, in our household, a college education was not high on our list of priorities. But in February of 1944, when I was a sophomore in high school, one of those unplanned events occurred that transforms a person's life. A friend and I had arranged to spend Saturday playing basketball. When I arrived at his home, his mother greeted me at the front door and explained that he had to cancel out on our plans since arrangements had been made for him to take the college entrance examination at the University of Chicago. I was very disappointed, but then my friend called out from a second story window--much to his mother's displeasure--that I should go with him to the University and that we would be back in time to salvage the rest of the day. I had nothing better to do and agreed.

We arrived at Cobb Hall. The person in charge had my friend sign in for the examination and then turned to me and asked for my name. "Oh, no," I said, "I'm not on your list and I'm not here to take the exam." He said, "Well since you're here, you might as well take the exam." So I did. A few weeks later, my friend received a letter of rejection and I was admitted. Not being sure of what to do, I decided to enroll in the summer session with the idea that I would return to my junior year in high school if all did not go well.

The summer of 1944 was a remarkable time. The allies landed in Normandy and began the invasion of Europe. The Democrats held their national convention in Chicago, and my roommate at the University was a nephew of Paul McNutt, Democratic governor of Indiana, who arranged for us to have passes to all of the convention activities. President Roosevelt was seeking nomination for his fourth term as president and the theme song for the convention was, "Don't change horses in mid-stream." But of course they did make one major change. Wallace was dropped as the vice president in favor of Truman.

That summer my mind was aroused as never before. The courses and faculty were extraordinary, but equally important were the debates long into the night with other students on issues of religion, politics, and race relations (the term used at the time). Once caught up in the intellectual life of the University of Chicago, I never looked back.

My years at the University were a transforming experience, and in a very real sense, defined the rest of my life. I took OII--Observation, Interpretation, and Integration--in a special section taught jointly by President Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. Hutchins was at the peak of his fame

and Adler had played a key role in developing the Great Books program (he was affectionately referred to as "The Great Bookie" by students). We had about a dozen students in the class and the discussions were intense. Even to this day, I consider myself something of an expert on Plato's *Republic*. Allen Bloom, who was a fellow student in that course, later went on to write the well-known book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. I took BI/SCI, the biological sciences, from Carlson, one of the world's great scientists, who was an equally brilliant teacher. His textbook with Johnson, *The Machinery of the Human Body*, is a classic. My introductory chemistry course was taught by Harold Urey, a Nobel Laureate, who later became a lifelong friend. For approximately a year, I roomed in the home of Professor David Riesman, who was famous at the time, but later became even more famous when he wrote *The Lonely Crowd*. He often invited me to parties at his home that included some of the great social scientists of the era. And for some time, I worked as a research assistant for Professor Rashevsky, who was involved in formulating mathematical theories of biological and social processes. I did endless computations for him on equations that were basic to his theories. This predated digital computers and the work was done on a hand-cranked calculator. We ran into real problems that we never quite solved because the equations proved to be too disorderly. For the mathematicians among you, they were second order difference equations and, years later, they were to become part of what is now called, "chaos theory." If I only I had known then what I know today.

Those were wonderful days that shaped my views about the nature of a great University and the concept of a liberal education. The University of Chicago may not have produced its share of Wall Street financiers or corporate lawyers, but it has produced more than its share of academics. Everywhere I have been--schools, colleges, universities, research institutions, foundations--I have met people educated at the University of Chicago who have made a difference in our society because of their high academic standards and their commitment to excellence.

I spent part of my career in La Jolla, California at the University of California, San Diego helping build what has become a world-class institution. And in the building process, the image of the University of Chicago was always very much in my mind. In the early 1960s, when UC San Diego expanded from an oceanographic institution to a full-fledged university, those in charge of the University had the wisdom and good fortune to recruit a large number of the founding faculty from the University of Chicago. Those faculty became the core of the institution, and for many years they had a University of Chicago New Year's party in La Jolla to celebrate their Chicago heritage. Indeed, UC San Diego was often referred to as the University of Chicago at San Diego. Harold Urey was in that founding group of faculty, along with Joe Mayer, who was also a world-famous chemist. UC San Diego was successful in recruiting Joe because he had a wife, Maria, who was a physicist. But because nepotism was still in effect in those days at the University of Chicago, she could not hold a regular academic appointment. Both were recruited to UC San Diego with full academic appointments. And a few years later, Maria Mayer won the Nobel Prize in physics, the second woman in history to win a Nobel Prize. San Diego was not as sophisticated a city in those days as it is today, and the newspaper headlines read, "La Jolla Housewife Wins Nobel Prize."

Finally, let me briefly comment on the SAT college entrance exam. As you probably know, the test will undergo a fundamental change effective for students entering college in the Fall of 2006--three years from now. In the 1940s, there was an interesting debate among academics

about the nature of college entrance examinations. The principal focal points of this debate were at Harvard University and the University of Chicago. To oversimplify matters, President James Bryant Conant of Harvard University and his colleagues advocated for a test designed to measure aptitude, whereas the Chicago contingent argued for a test designed to measure achievement. Conant's perspective won the day and with it came the widespread adoption of the SAT. Conant later in life expressed regrets about his role in promoting the SAT, but it was too late. With the changes that go into effect in the fall of 2006, the SAT will be reinvented in the form that the Chicago group advocated many years ago. It is a long overdue change that I believe will have a fundamental effect on K-12 education and will be a more useful device for judging whether a student is prepared to do college level work.

Once again, let me say how wonderful it is to be back at the University of Chicago. And how honored I am to be awarded the Alumni Medal.