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The next chapter: At 96, memory research pioneer and former UCSD chancellor refuses to let his mind retire

What brings him the most satisfaction now? “Renewing my whole interest in scientific matters.”

By Barbara Bry



At 96, Richard C. Atkinson talks with interest and enthusiasm about a young professor's research on reading skills, the same enthusiasm that he has embraced his entire life. The former UC San Diego chancellor and University of California president today spends his time playing golf with “old men in their 80s,” actively monitoring scientific research, and advocating for the future of American higher education.

“Here I am at 96, and in my early retirement, my thoughts were about events that occurred back in the 60s,” Atkinson says with a chuckle.

In 1968, early in his academic career at Stanford, he and graduate student Richard Shiffrin published their landmark paper outlining three types of memory: the sensory store, the short-term store, and the long-term store. This research revolutionized cognitive psychology and became one of the most cited publications in behavioral sciences.

After retiring from full-time academic employment in 2011, he decided to revisit his past. “It was really clear to me that critics had missed key aspects of the Atkinson-Shiffrin theory,” he explains. His renewed advocacy led to a special journal issue and the eventual republication of his original paper with a new introduction by UCSD professor John Wixted, who had been “stunned” to discover the theory’s unrecognized significance upon rereading it.

In 1968, the same year that his groundbreaking research was published, his career took an unexpected turn when he took a leave of absence from Stanford to work for Robert F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign on education policy, an interest that grew out of his research on computer assisted instruction for teaching math and reading to young children.

Though Kennedy’s assassination cut that chapter short, Atkinson found himself drawn to national science policy. By 1976, he was leading the National Science Foundation under President Carter during what he calls “a wild time” for American science.

“We were generating lots of Nobel Prizes but weren’t maintaining our technological lead in so many areas,” Atkinson recalls. His close relationship with Sen. Ted Kennedy proved pivotal, enabling him to champion university-based research and spearhead the Bayh-Dole Act, which gave universities rights to their technology innovations. This change in ownership allowed industry to license these technologies from the universities and to commercialize the research, creating dramatic improvements in all areas of the American society and an economic bonanza for the U.S. economy.

Next, Atkinson served as chancellor of UC San Diego (1980-1995), president of the University of California system (1995-2003), and chair of the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education at the National Academies until 2011.

By then, he was 82, that moment when many of us would embrace a quiet retirement. Instead, Atkinson took up golf for the first time and renewed his connection to scientific research, not the least of which was how a small white ball repeatedly avoids a hole in the ground.

Today, Atkinson lives at The Vi, a retirement community near UCSD, where he moved with his late wife Rita in 2016. He stays intellectually alive and maintains connections with about 50 former University of California colleagues who also call The Vi home. “We moved to The Vi because Rita was beginning to have serious problems with memory, particularly driving a car, and we both needed help at the time,” he said. “Rita suffered a brain hemorrhage in 2020 when she was with her grandson in the swimming pool. Her last words were ‘Don’t worry. I’ll be fine tomorrow.’ She never regained conscious,” he said. “It’s a blessing to die that way.”

Despite recent health challenges – “My heart is in good shape, but my lungs are an awful mess,” his days follow a steady rhythm. Some golf, some Zoom calls with former colleagues and current education leaders around the country, and the occasional campus seminar where “students are stunned to see this old man, and they check the accuracy of what he says on the Internet.”

When asked what brings him the most satisfaction now, he pauses thoughtfully. “Just renewing my whole interest in scientific matters.”

What troubles him most is the uncertain future of American higher education. He passionately explains the “Vannevar Bush science policy” – the framework established after World War II that positioned university-based basic research, funded through competitive government grants, as the engine of American innovation.

“The private sector is responsible for applied research, but you can’t expect them to invest appropriately in basic research because the payoffs are too uncertain,” Atkinson explains. “It’s the responsibility of the government to fund it through a competitive, peer-reviewed process.”

Despite the challenges facing universities today, Atkinson takes pride in UCSD’s continued excellence and praises the leadership of current Chancellor Pradeep Khosla. He notes that a 1995 National Academy of Sciences study ranked UC San Diego among the top 10 universities nationally – one of only two public institutions to achieve that distinction alongside UC Berkeley.

“Thirty years from now, that might be the proudest thing I can point to – the quality of the institution,” he reflects.

I end our interview by asking, “What is your current goal?”

“Staying alive,” he says with characteristic directness, then adds, “Any day when I breathe fairly well is a good one.”