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**Emeritus Status: It's a Matter of Honor, Especially When It's Denied**

*By Ryan Brown*

Robert G. Natelson had been retired from the faculty of the University of Montana Law School for more than a year when he learned in June that his former colleagues had voted to deny him emeritus status.

The title, reserved for "meritorious faculty members" with at least 10 years at the university, carries few tangible benefits. It isn't a guarantee of office space or research money. There isn't even a campus organization for emeriti faculty. It is simply a title.

But for Mr. Natelson, who taught at the law school for 23 years and retired as a full professor in May 2010, the lack of concrete rewards connected to becoming professor emeritus made his slight all the more stinging.

"It's incredibly petty," he says. "It would have cost the university literally nothing."

Mr. Natelson contends that the faculty voted against awarding him emeritus status because of his politics. He is a two-time Republican candidate for governor of Montana who in his scholarly work studies the legal meaning of the Constitution at the time of its drafting. In 2004 he accused the university of refusing to allow him to teach a constitutional-law class because of his outspoken conservatism, a bruising battle he eventually won but one that hardly endeared him to the rest of the faculty. In the eyes of his fellow faculty members, he contends, his political battles have always overshadowed his scholarship.

For its part, however, the university points out that its policies make clear that emeritus status isn't guaranteed. "It's meant to honor faculty who have been really outstanding citizens within the university and contributed to our community in a variety of significant ways," says Perry J. Brown, provost and vice president for academic affairs. Whether or not Mr. Natelson fell into that category, he adds, was a matter for his department to decide.
High-profile denials of emeritus status like Mr. Natelson’s are rare, but with the average age of the professoriate ticking upward and cash-strapped campuses attempting to coax faculty members into retirement, Montana is far from the only institution wrestling with how it should relate to its retired professors. And although emeritus designation typically holds little practical meaning, in a profession laden with titles that carry status it has become widely regarded as a final seal of approval in a successful academic career. It is also an easy way for a campus to stay tethered to its retired professors, who often continue their scholarly output beyond their final paycheck.

"We want our senior faculty to see retirement as an attractive option," says James B. Young, associate provost for faculty affairs at Northwestern University. "Emeritus status is one way of honoring a group of individuals who have served the university for a long time."

_Inconsistent Meaning_

But for a title so widely awarded, there is little consistency across institutions about what it means to be an emeritus professor. Is it a status reserved for the exceptional or a courtesy afforded to all retiring faculty? Should it mean better access to campus resources after retirement or simply serve as a proverbial tip of the university’s hat for a job well done? College policies run the full spectrum, from institutions where emeritus status guarantees research dollars to those where it is nothing more than a title to put on a CV.

Even when emeritus status offers few practical benefits, however, its honorific nature can turn cases of denial into highly emotional referendums on the value of a life’s work. Last September, the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois voted unanimously against awarding emeritus status to William C. Ayers, who was retiring as a professor of education. The board’s chairman, Christopher G. Kennedy, blasted him for dedicating his 1974 book, _Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism_, in part to Sirhan Sirhan, the assassin of Mr. Kennedy’s father, Robert F. Kennedy.

"There is nothing more antithetical to the hopes for a university that is lively and yet civil ... than to permanently seal off debate with one’s opponents by killing them," the board chairman told trustees before the vote. "There can be no place in a democracy to celebrate political assassinations or to honor those who do so."

Mr. Ayers had written the book and its dedication long before he went to Illinois, during his time with the Weather Underground, an antiwar group during the Vietnam War era that claimed responsibility for bombing a series of public buildings in the 1960s.
and 1970s. He went on to earn a doctorate and spent more than two decades as a professor on the university's Chicago campus.

The denial of emeritus to Mr. Ayers was notable since the status had been approved by the faculty before being sent to the board, which generally conferred the title on long-serving professors without debate. But for many members of the faculty, the move was unusual in another regard as well. In a letter to the Board of Trustees appealing the decision, the Faculty Senate argued that by choosing to weigh Mr. Ayers's personal history—rather than simply his academic merit—in conferring an honorific professional title, the university had set a dangerous precedent.

"We believe that the possibility that this vote will cast a chill on open discussion is a serious possibility, which can only damage the academic freedom that we cherish," the letter stated.

Like Illinois, a majority of institutions have policies stating explicitly that emeritus status is not automatically awarded but given at the discretion of the universities' administrations, according to a 2007 survey of faculty-retirement polices conducted by the American Association of University Professors. That study, which surveyed 567 two- and four-year institutions, found that 82 percent gave out the title of emeritus/emerita, and that fewer than half of those institutions awarded it automatically to all retiring tenured professors. A 2007-8 survey by the Association of Retirement Organizations in Higher Education showed that more than two-thirds of institutions granted emeritus status only "after review" by administrators.

The difference between automatically awarding emeritus status and having the administration decide it, however, is often little more than semantics. In practice, on many campuses the title is denied to no one.

Howard C. Howland, president of the Cornell Association of Professors Emeriti and a professor emeritus in the department of neurobiology and behavior there, says he cannot remember a case in which the university's administration denied a professor emeritus status. At Cornell the distinction comes stacked with practical benefits, including guaranteed office space and $2,000 for "professional activities" each year for the first five years of retirement. The emeriti group also runs a lecture series and volunteer activities for faculty emeriti and has a representative on the faculty senate.

"To become emeritus you have to have tenure and you can't have
committed any offenses that would get you kicked out of the university," he says. "That's about it."

A Symbiotic Relationship
For institutions grappling with major budget cuts, being inclusive about emeritus status can also help nudge aging faculty members toward retirement. Last September, the University of Nebraska system announced a plan to offer a year’s salary to some tenured faculty members in exchange for their retirement. Daniel W. Wheeler, president of the emeriti association at the Lincoln campus and a professor emeritus of leadership studies there, says the administration asked him to explain to faculty how they could maintain a connection to the university after retirement as faculty emeriti, a title he says is given to most tenured professors. In the end, 104 faculty members took the university up on its buyout offer, including 77 at the Lincoln campus.

"There's a symbiotic relationship between retired faculty and the university," Mr. Wheeler says. "The emeriti organization gives faculty a way to be involved in the university community and, at the same time, when emeriti do interesting things in the community it's good for the university's image."

The university also has financial reasons to maximize its connections to retired faculty members, he adds, to increase its chance of receiving donations from them in the future.

"If you don't give it to everyone it creates a lot of consternation that I'm not sure is worth it for anyone involved," he says.

But liberally awarding emeritus status can be a double-edged sword. An institution takes some of the credit when retired faculty members do something professionally impressive but also gets some of the responsibility when their actions bring the university negative publicity.

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for example, emeritus status is automatically conferred on all retiring faculty, earning them, among other benefits, "full professorial library privileges."

In April, however, Chapel Hill administrators revoked one emeritus professor's access to e-mail, his faculty Web page, and the campus network, including access to online library resources, after they claimed he misused university resources in a personal dispute.

Elliot M. Cramer, a professor emeritus of psychology who retired in 1994, had been using a unc.edu e-mail address as the point of
contact for a nonprofit organization he runs, the Friends of Orange County Animal Shelter, which has no affiliation with the university. He had also linked from his university Web site to a page detailing a conflict with a fellow animal-rights activist, Joseph Villarosa. After Mr. Villarosa complained repeatedly to the university's general counsel, Lesley C. Strohm, about Mr. Cramer's use of the university network, the university stripped his access. In an e-mail to Mr. Cramer, Holden Thorp, chancellor of the Chapel Hill campus, wrote that the professor had violated the university's policy on personal use when he "embroiled the university in ... personal issues and diverted university resources from the things we really need to focus on to a degree that is simply unacceptable."

To the administration, Mr. Cramer's access had been a privilege, but to Mr. Cramer it was a reward for decades of service. He argues that as an emeritus faculty member, he was entitled to use the network for both personal and professional purposes and says that his lack of access will inhibit his scholarship going forward.

"I cannot access online journals at home, which interferes with my continued professional activities," he wrote in an e-mail. "I am outraged at the university's treatment of a retired professor."

Mark of Excellence
The matter of the practical benefits of emeritus status, however, is a moot point at many institutions, especially community colleges, that lack resources to share with retired faculty members. Instead, officials at several such institutions say they make emeritus status meaningful by limiting the number of people who receive it.

At Lesley University, in Cambridge, Mass., faculty must retire with excellence in teaching, research, and service to qualify for the title, says Martha B. McKenna, the provost. A faculty member with an outstanding publication record but checkered student evaluations, for instance, wouldn't make the cut. That winnows the field considerably. This year six faculty members retired but only two have become emeriti.

Ms. McKenna says that Lesley's rigorous standards for emeritus status emerged from a 2006 negotiation between the faculty and administrators. At the time, she says, the university president suggested making all faculty emeriti upon retirement, but faculty members liked the idea of making it an exclusive title.

"The faculty felt emeritus status was special," she says. "Not everyone can achieve that level of excellence in their career."

Whether institutions are selective or not about who becomes an
eminent faculty member, they tend to use similar review processes for deciding who receives the status. If an emeritus designation is not automatically conferred on retiring faculty, it is generally hashed out at the opaque level of university bureaucracy, determined by the votes and signatures of departments, deans, provosts, and boards. Few institutions keep track of who is denied or why.

That means that individuals like Mr. Natelson at the University of Montana can usually only speculate on the reasons for denial of emeritus status. Mr. Natelson, now a fellow at the Independence Institute, a think tank in Golden, Colo., says that by denying it to him, the university turned the simple matter of a courtesy title into a secretive affair that has soured his relationship with the institution.

"They have refused to provide me with an explanation," he says. "I just don't think I will have a relationship with the university going forward."

"Politically harsh, self centered, and inept people, who "depend on the worth of their own ideas" to get ahead, do very badly in ALL fields of life, in ALL times, in ALL cultures—most of us learn this at about 11 or 12 years old in middle schools—some of us, fail to pay attention till after 70 years old. Uneducated people lead lives of much noise and little final worth. Confucius wrote about this as did the Buddha. GEEZ when will some faculty grow up."

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How is that different from any title like Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Visiting Professor, Lecturer, and more? At one university, Associate Professor means you wrote a book, while at another, it means you're a great teacher who presented at a few conferences.

6 people liked this.

johnny6  3 days ago
Feeling bad about being denied an emeritus title?

Well, imagine how hard working, well-evaluated, productive, yet poorly paid adjunct feel!

17 people liked this.

connor4355  3 days ago  in reply to johnny6
You are right. The title of Emeritus Adjunct Professor should be awarded to meritorious individuals.

5 people liked this.

sgtrock  2 days ago  in reply to connor4355
I do not have much empathy with adjuncts. Being an adjunct is a choice. If you are unhappy with the pay, benefits and/or status, move on. I was once told that you can select your profession or you can select the salary range for which you will work -- but you can't select both.

4 people liked this.

vatican  2 days ago  in reply to sgtrock
You are assuming that being an adjunct is a choice i.e., something within a person's control. Is it really something that is within a person's control all the time? What you haven't considered is the lack of opportunities as a result of the unwillingness of senior administrators to open up tenure track positions because it is simply cheaper to hire adjuncts and easier to dispose of as well. There! I've said it, disposed of. I'm a tenured faculty member and I am privileged but I do see the adjuncts who are well qualified for tenure tracks and would even qualify for tenure passed over.

7 people liked this.

12073063  2 days ago  in reply to sgtrock
Being an adjunct is often not a choice but rather the only form of employment available. Perhaps if more of the 70 plus aged faculty were awarded emeritus status, they would retire and enable more opportunities for younger faculty (many of whom are adjunct) to obtain full-time status.

3 people liked this.

fly_on_the_wall  1 day ago  in reply to sgtrock
That's both flip and moronic. It is not a choice. Believe me, most of us would.

Like
The confusion in U.S. universities is doubtless traced to what is seen erroneously as an implied concept of "academic merit or accomplishment", when in fact emeritus simply means one has completed one's period of service. This is the meaning in universities throughout Europe (although sometimes restricted to retired full professors).

Oxford Dictionary definition: "of the former holder of an office, especially a university professor) having retired but allowed to retain their title as an honour" and its origin: "mid 18th century: from Latin, past participle of emereri 'earn one's discharge by service', from e- (variant of ex-) 'out of, from' + mereri 'earn' "

UNC-CH has it right, UIUC has it wrong, squared.

The article keeps repeating the idea of "few practical benefits" but does touch on one at the end - remote access to very expensive online library resources. Most library database/journal vendors accept emeritus faculty as being included in their "only current students, faculty, and staff" licensing terms whereas faculty and staff who have simply retired are not. For faculty who, as the article also mentions, continue to engage in scholarship after retirement, this is a valuable benefit indeed. In most cases, the campus IT department has to also maintain a network/email account of some kind for the individual in order for the library to provide access as most libraries rely on "ldap" or "shibboleth" authentication tied to those account systems to provide off-campus access.

The institution I retired from doesn't give a damn about what I think about anything concerned with it and is, moreover, pretty offensive in a lot of ways. But ah! those databases. They count for something. All the rest is just bruised ego on my part and to hell with that.

How many universities have benefitted when books were published by emeritus faculty (with the book jacket indicating the author is an emeritus professor at such-and-such university)? How many universities benefitted when an emeritus professor was selected for a distinguished national or international panel or commission? How many universities benefitted when an emeritus professor made a patent? How many universities benefitted when an emeritus professor won a distinguished award (which has included Nobel Prizes in the past)? The fact of the matter is, given the cost-benefits of granting emeritus status, any university in question has always been far-and-away the winner. I don't care how controversial any particular professor was during his/her career, the granting of emeritus status for meeting certain proscribed minimums (rank and years of service) should be automatic. I don't care for Professor Natelson's views, but that is irrelevant. He earned emeritus status, case closed.
The article states........

"It's meant to honor faculty who have been really outstanding citizens within the university and contributed to our community in a variety of significant ways," says Perry J. Brown, provost and vice president for academic affairs. Whether or not Mr. Natelson fell into that category, he adds, was a matter for his department to decide.

End of story.

6 people liked this. Like

If emeritus status in part allows a university to maintain ties with a productive and noteworthy scholar, denying this status makes it easier to sever those ties when it is beneficial to do so. Emeritus is an honor for the professor, but it also has practical implications (of association) for both parties. I would imagine the University of Illinois had been looking for a way to sever its relationship with Ayers for some time.

1 person liked this. Like

Bill Ayers made his bones over the years by being a rather ordinary leftist, anti-American hack. Aside from the academy, where on earth could such a man do as well as he has done? I suppose the same could be said of Ward Churchill, Cornell West, Skip Gates, and the infamous "Duke 88" of the 2006 Lacrosse team scandal.

Whether Ayers is given or denied emeritus status is of little consequence. He already has his. And that's that.

Get over it.

3 people liked this. Like

So the lesson I'm getting here is to shut the hell up when you are a Conservative on campus. So much for the diversity propaganda drummed by our overly educated elites.

5 people liked this. Like

Oh, I think the lesson is to think twice about doing things that are controversial. People like Natelson, Ayers, and Churchill all indulged in getting their name in the public eye in ways that made them targets later. None were exactly what might be termed good university citizens.

6 people liked this. Like

Good point!
Faculty should be required to retire at 65. In my department, two people are obviously senile, but continue to teach and serve on committees.

This article is not about the retirement age, but about how criteria for emeritus status are applied. I bet there are people who are over 65 who lucid enough to understand that.

Maybe Mr. Natelson was a pain in the ass (political views aside) as a colleague and he's being “punished” for that. It's how a faculty gets the last word in with a bully.