



UC San Diego Foundation Trustee



Richard C. Atkinson

As the fifth Chancellor of UC San Diego (1980 to 1995), Dr. Richard Atkinson is frequently credited by colleagues and community leaders as a pivotal force behind the remarkable trajectory of the university. His accomplishments at UCSD and throughout his career ultimately led to his appointment as seventeenth President of the University of California, a position he held from 1995 to 2003, after which he returned to San Diego.

When asked of his greatest point of pride in the campus to which he continues to commit himself full time, Richard unhesitatingly replies, “The last year I was Chancellor, the National Research Council issued a report ranking universities in terms of quality of faculty and graduate programs. UC San Diego was ranked ten on that list, in recognition of its phenomenal rise. There was only one other public university in the top ten, namely University of California, Berkeley.”

During his years as Chancellor, the university’s faculty grew by nearly 50 percent, and student enrollment doubled. Richard adopted a parallel strategy of growth off campus by encouraging technology transfer and active involvement with industry; the university’s faculty and alumni are credited for at least 193 start-up companies, including many local biotechs. UCSD has become a major driver in transforming the San Diego region into a world leader in technology-based industries; Richard’s role in this was noted in a recent study of research universities and their impact on the genesis of high-technology centers.

Richard’s tenure is credited with strengthening UCSD’s ties across many sectors in the region, an effort that he continues in his role as Foundation Trustee, and by serving on campus advisory councils for Rady School, IR/PS, Sulpizio Family Cardiovascular Center and the Stuart Collection. He is also an emeritus trustee of the La Jolla Playhouse. In addition to his generosity of time, he and his wife, Rita, have endowed five chairs in the Atkinson name.

Prior to his administrative years at UC San Diego, Richard built a reputation as an internationally respected scholar and scientist. Educated at University of Chicago and Indiana University, he began his academic career at Stanford University after serving in the U.S. Army. He was a member of the Stanford faculty from 1956 to 1975, except for a three-year period at UCLA.

In 1975, Richard was appointed deputy director of the National Science Foundation by President Gerald Ford. Two years later, President Jimmy Carter promoted him 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.

Richard’s own research focused on problems of memory and cognition. His theory of human memory, which has shaped research in the field, 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. He developed one of the first computer-controlled systems



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for instruction, which served as a prototype for the commercial development of computer-assisted instruction, and led to his co-founding of the Computer Curriculum Corporation.

Richard's scientific contributions have resulted in election to the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute 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, the recipient of numerous honorary degrees, and has had a mountain in Antarctica named in his honor!

After eight-and-a-half years in Northern California as UC President, Richard and Rita, who holds a PhD in psychology, returned to La Jolla. "We knew we would always come back. My wife and I think of UC San Diego and La Jolla as home."