

Gray Expectations

Emeritus centers bring retired professors back to campus

On the second Tuesday of every month, some 15 to 30 professors at Emory University meet for breakfast in a room off the university hospital's cafeteria. They discuss religion and science over biscuits and grits. They dissect *A Beautiful Mind* while sipping coffee and juice. They consider Enron and the economy over eggs and bacon.

Though they come from such diverse fields as sociology, medicine, history, and chemistry, the professors have one thing in common: They're all retired.

The breakfast club is among the programs offered to graying scholars by Emory's year-old Emeritus College. Conceived as a way to combat the isolation that many professors feel in retirement, it also offers retired faculty members a chance to socialize, discuss topics with fellow intellectuals, teach an occasional course, advise a junior professor or a student, give a lecture, and find encouragement for their scholarly pursuits.

Emeritus College is one of dozens of such centers that have been established around the country in recent years. Representatives of more than 40 universities attended the first annual meeting of the Association of Retirement Organizations in Higher Education in October.

With an aging professoriate, institutions and retirees alike have recognized the value of professors' staying involved. Retired faculty members teach or otherwise offer their years of experience in ways that directly benefit an institution. Emeritus groups can offer tangible perks, like office space, computer-training seminars, and parking privileges, as well as intellectual and social stimulation.

"It's a two-way street," says Harriet M. King, senior vice provost for academic affairs at Emory. Traditionally, when professors retired at Emory, they found themselves immediately cut off from the university.

Ms. King expects Emeritus College to change that. "We hope over time it will help faculty who want to retire to know that they can transition to retirement," she says. "It doesn't have to be a cliff they fall off."

And in a sagging economy, though it might seem logical for administrators to avoid spending precious budget funds on retirees, emeriti centers may actually offer a way to entice more professors to retire.

Like the institutions they are affiliated with, the emeriti groups range in size, composition, and character. The "Senior Scholars Academy," formed in the fall at Indiana State University, plans to be predominantly research-oriented. Yale University's new Henry Koerner Center will offer research money to retired professors and will also coordinate teaching and social activities. At Fordham University, a more casual group, which meets just a few of times a year, has sprung up for retired faculty members. Like Emory's, many of the groups are still works in progress—finding their way and learning from each other.

Emeritus College was created by Eugene Bianchi, a professor emeritus of religion who has written several books on aging and who retired in 2000. The idea "just kind of came up naturally," he says, when he began to prepare for his own retirement after 32 years of teaching.

"Rather than have people so cut off, this gives them a chance to stay involved," says the bespectacled former Jesuit priest, whose necktie peeks out from under his navy argyle sweater.

Mr. Bianchi, 72, who is often at work on multiple projects—lecturing, writing his memoirs, publishing a book on the Jesuits—wanted to create a place for professors who weren't content to simply fade away from academe. Several years before he retired, he formed a committee with like-minded colleagues, including John Bugge, a professor of English who is still on the faculty and is president of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

“I saw it as the ultimate fringe benefit,” says Mr. Bugge. Together they designed a dream building and drew up a wish list for the center. Mr. Bianchi acknowledges that some of their original requests were a bit over the top—their proposal asked for furnished, private offices near the center of campus, a lounge, a seminar room, and an administrative suite—but the administration liked the overall idea. “He’s very smooth,” says Mr. Bugge. “He can charm an administrator out of \$50,000 and make it seem like it was their idea. He pushes and doesn’t take no for an answer.”

The provost agreed to give them \$60,000 a year for a two-year pilot program, and assigned them modest office space a few minutes’ drive from the main campus. With that pilot program coming to an end, Mr. Bianchi says they have applied for and expect to be granted another \$95,000 a year through 2005.

The boxy, lightless building that houses Emeritus College is a far cry from the stately, tiled-roof, limestone-and-marble buildings that grace Emory’s campus. In the center’s cramped common room, orange chairs and brown wall hangings look as if they date from the ’70s. But on this day in mid-January, Mr. Bianchi isn’t complaining. He’s too busy running through a list of the center’s plans for this year with the director of Emory’s alumni association and a fellow retired professor.

Because the breakfast club has been a success, the center will start a similar lunch series. It is also beginning an “Eight Great Lectures” series, intended for retired professionals throughout the Atlanta area, with talks by retired professors on such topics as medical quackery, Theodore Roosevelt, and race and politics in central Georgia. The first speaker, John Stone, a retired cardiologist and professor emeritus of medicine, drew a crowd of nearly 100 to his poetry reading.

And back by popular demand is a discussion session cosponsored by the Emory Women’s Center on late-life transitions for current and retired female faculty members. Last year, a talk led by a psychotherapist who is the wife of a senior professor touched on issues like relating to adult children, long-term care, and handling life with a sick spouse.

Mr. Bianchi says there are about 300 local emeriti on their mailing list, while about 70 are actively participating in the college. Mirroring the composition of many faculties’ senior ranks, there are far fewer women than men involved in Emory’s Emeritus College. No retired female faculty members attended the January breakfast meeting or a recent brainstorming meeting at the center. But as more women move through the professorial pipeline, events like the late-life transitions discussion are designed to attract them to the college.

Emeritus College will also sponsor a film series in conjunction with the alumni office. Not many people showed up for the last one, which included *Wag the Dog* and other movies on the theme “Toys and Missiles: At What Cost?” The next series will feature movies about weddings, like *Father of the Bride*.

In addition to organizing social and intellectual events, the college encourages emeriti to get involved with students. A freshman seminar program, for which four retired professors have applied so far, will put them back in the classrooms to teach for-credit courses for stipends of \$5,000 each. The Adopt-A-Hall program, a big hit last year, will again send retired faculty members to undergraduate dorms for informal chats with students.

Last spring, Elizabeth S. Sharp, a 69-year-old retired professor of nursing, joined with another retired professor to talk about “The Meaning of Life” as part of the Adopt-a-Hall program. She spoke to a group of about a dozen students from Clifton Towers about growing up in a family of Christian ministers. Serving others, she told them, gives her life purpose.

Two months later, Ms. Sharp received a thank-you note from a student who said the discussion had been particularly meaningful. “It really gratified me,” says the retired professor. “It’s so critical that people from different generations talk to each other, and this program is making that happen.” In December, the dormitory invited Ms. Sharp back for a Christmas party.

Retired professors who are active in Emeritus College not only stay involved with students and reconnect with long-time colleagues, but also make new friends.

“Those of us who have been penned up in hospitals finally get to know other faculty,” says a professor emeritus from the medical school.

Serving as mentors is another two-way benefit. For the past year, Irwin “Jay” Knopf, 78, a retired professor of psychology, has been advising an assistant professor in the Spanish-and-Portuguese department, helping her with her tenure application. “It’s a relationship I’ve had with the university since 1964 which continues with colleagues, with programs, and with keeping me alive and busy,” he says.

Gerald B. Lowrey, director of Emory’s alumni association, is interested in connecting alumni with emeriti. Emory doesn’t have a football team, he notes, and so the faculty is the equivalent—alumni come back to see their favorite professors. And of course if those alumni come bearing gifts, he says, Emory certainly won’t turn them away. Last March, the alumni office worked with Emeritus College to invite former students of James Harvey Young, a popular history professor who retired in the 1980s, to return for a reunion with their former teacher. When he was teaching American social and intellectual history, Mr. Young always asked his students to write a term paper about the recent history of a topic they were passionate about. He kept 640 of those papers.

The alumni office tracked down 100 of his former students, from the classes of 1949 to 1974, to come back and talk about the impact he had had on their lives.

“It was one of those magical nights,” says Mr. Lowrey. “We’re getting alums back talking about one of their favorite faculty members and a very important life event in taking a class. What alumni office would not want to reconnect with their alumni in that way?”

Before creating Emeritus College, the organizers took a careful look at other centers. They modeled several programs after those offered by the University of Southern California’s Emeriti Center, which, having been around for 25 years, is considered the gold standard by many in the field.

Unlike Emory’s center, USC’s also caters to retired staff members. Its annual budget, which includes outside grants, ranges from \$300,000 to \$400,000. The center keeps the employment records for all retirees of the university and advocates on their behalf for health care and other benefits.

The teaching-and-research arm of USC’s center is called the Emeriti College and was created 10 years ago to encourage the intellectual activities of retired scholars. That division was of particular interest to Emory. USC’s program awards small annual research stipends, of up to \$2,000 per professor, and endows an annual lecture that recognizes continuing achievements in scholarly publications. It also holds an off-campus lecture program that allows emeriti to give lectures all over the area—for example, at a retirement center in Beverly Hills, a residential retirement community in East Los Angeles, and before many neighborhood and civic groups.

“We have set up a community model,” says Elizabeth Redmond, director of the Emeriti Center. “We serve our retirees by providing them opportunities to serve others.”

Ms. Redmond says the center’s activities also benefit the university’s bottom line. Retired professors who teach undergraduate and graduate courses occasionally save administrators from hiring adjuncts. The off-campus lecture series, which each year reaches thousands in the local community, helps recruit new students to USC. The existence of the center also helps departments hire senior professors from other universities, Ms. Redmond says.

And although the center is not fundraising unit, “as a byproduct, if you help the faculty and staff to feel as though they remain a part of the USC family, then they are very likely to donate to the university,” she says. Last year, for example, a retired staff member who had been involved with the center and the university donated a million dollars to USC.

At Indiana State, another effort is taking shape. Called the Senior Scholars Academy, it was founded in September by William A. Dando, a professor emeritus of geography, geology, and anthropology. After 18 months of planning, including a survey sent to 400 of its local retirees and a research report submitted to the provost, the center secured \$50,000 from the university for its first year. Mr. Dando says the program will aspire to be not so much a social center as a respected research hub. “We’re actually trying to enhance the academic flavor of our campus and surrounding areas,” he says.

Not all has been smooth sailing in Terre Haute. Finding adequate space has been a problem. So has getting the legal authority to submit grant applications and sign off on expenditures. But Mr. Dando is confident that he can work out the kinks. “I feel that what we have here ... is going to make a difference.”

At Yale University, a large alumni donation has financed a plush center for retired faculty members. Opened in January as a result of a \$10-million gift, the Henry Koerner Center is housed in the oldest building in New Haven. Its facilities include a 600-square-foot furnished common room; an adjoining 300-square-foot seminar room; 12 faculty offices equipped with computers and telephones; and two study carrels. Bernard Lytton, a professor emeritus of urology who is director of the center, says it will involve emeriti in teaching, provide them with research money, offer computer help, and plan social activities.

Meanwhile, at Emory, the members of Emeritus College are reaching out in many directions. They want to play host to a reception each spring for new faculty retirees and give out a distinguished-service award to a professor emeritus. They are angling for a permanent line in the university’s budget, and hoping for a nicer location.

“Right now there is a Chinese menu, in a sense,” of opportunities for the center, says Mr. Knopf, who helped to organize the film series there. “We hope the administration will choose some and really find the value in them.”

In an off-campus lecture program organized by the U. of Southern California’s Emeriti College, Peter Burton (in sport coat), a retired professor of international affairs, leads a discussion with a group of retirees in East Los Angeles.

Eugene Bianchi of Emory, the founder of Emeritus College: “Rather than have people so cut off, this gives them a chance to stay involved.”

By Piper Fogg

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