

Arthur E. Guedel Memorial Anesthesia Center

C.S.U. “Over Sixty Program”

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Born in London, Barrie Fairley joined the faculty of the University of Toronto in 1955 and moved to UCSF in 1969, where he was Associate Dean and Vice Chairman of the department. He was appointed Chairman at Stanford in 1985 and is now living in retirement with his wife (also of British origin) in Menlo Park.

Some 30 or more years ago, a British classmate of mine was visiting us in Tiburon and described his interest in bird-watching. I was surprised that this prototypical dyed-in-the-wool surgeon would have selected such a hobby, but the reason became clearer as he talked more of his experiences in different parts of the world. “Charlie” would go on to be one of the leading cancer surgeons in the U.K. but, at that time, he was impressed by the number of his colleagues who retired from busy professional lives to which they had devoted their full attention, only to deteriorate in their new inactivity. He believed that a part of the solution was to develop an interest outside medicine while still “in the prime,” with a view to accumulating sufficient experience and expertise by retirement age. An additional point that he made was the advantage of selecting a hobby that could be followed regardless of physical disability, should this occur later. In the case of bird-watching, he was at that time able to hike and climb in regions that were not necessarily hospitable. On the other hand, if, at a later date, this was not within his reach, he could still make observations and attend meetings in more welcoming geography, even from his back yard!

I was impressed with this concept and visualized continuing my interest in photography and travel, but there remained in the back of my mind the thought that this might not be enough and that I might be able to find something more consuming. This was to prove true when I took a sabbatical two years before retiring and decided to learn Spanish. The stimulus was the increasing population returning to this part of the New Spain of yore, and my desire to be able to communicate with them. I have previously described experiences in various immersion schools in Latin America, but it was not until later that I read an article in the *Los Altos Town Crier* written by a retired engineer. He had returned to school at San Jose State University (SJSU) to pursue a subject bypassed in his prior science-oriented education, obtaining his B.A. in History—just to improve his insight into world affairs. I was so impressed by his story that I called him to discuss what had been involved. He was most encouraging and told me how to go about applying. Little did I realize what I

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was getting myself into but, arising out of this, I have followed his example and have so enjoyed the process that I am describing below the California State University “Over Sixty Program,” for those not already aware of its existence.

In the 1980s, an addition was made to Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations.¹ Note 40760, under the heading *Board of Trustees of the California State University* (CSU), is entitled “Fee Waivers for California Residents Sixty Years of Age or Older.” For those of you who are interested, the web site address for CSU is <http://www.calstate.edu/>. The latest implementation is described in Executive Order 734, issued by CSU Chancellor, March 23, 2000 (<http://www.calstate.edu/HRAdm/Policies/feewaiver.shtml>). Without belaboring this further, the intent is to provide continued higher education at a nominal fee for senior citizens who complete admission requirements. Today, one can register and attend courses for a total tuition that in this climate of increasing fees is still less than \$50 per semester, regardless of the number of units taken. There is no obligation to pay the many additional items incurred by “regular” students. The only restriction is that one must register for classes after everyone else, thereby not taking the opportunity to attend a class in high demand from a regular fee-paying younger student.²

I have been taking advantage of this option since 2001, with one semester out for moving house and related activities. Although we are few and far between, I regularly see older students walking around campus, sitting in the library and even attending classes. Having said that, I suspect that I may currently be the oldest at SJSU, although the whole experience is making me younger every day!

From people that I have met or of whom I have heard, there are individuals taking advantage of this program in a variety of ways. Some attend an occasional class, merely auditing them. Others are enrolled for full courses. Certainly, there are those taking classes in Art History, History, Music, Photography,³ Journalism and many other fields. I decided to enroll for a degree program, knowing that I would not take a course seriously unless I was fully involved, including taking the examinations and thereby putting my pride on the line. Rather like the engineer turned historian, who encouraged me at the outset, my decision to pursue a conversion from the sciences to the humanities involved a sequence of stages that may be of interest to the reader thinking of taking advantage of this program.

The first step was to write, in Spanish, to the chair of the Foreign Languages Department, who happened to be head of the Spanish section, telling him of my

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experience with the language to date and the goal of obtaining what is known at SJSU as a “second bachelor’s degree.” Based on my letter and my claimed experiences, he waived the first two years of Spanish. However, I then had to jump through the various admission hoops and this proved a real challenge. To my surprise, the University of London was able to come up with something akin to a transcript from my six year M.B., B.S. program in the 1940s. However, it only listed the years that I was there, the courses I had taken and ended with the statement “Marks or grades awarded to Medical Students at Examinations of the University of London are confidential to the University and cannot be disclosed.” As we were never told our scores on the official university exams, I was somewhat relieved that they would remain hidden but, of course, the “evaluators” at SJSU did not know how to handle it. Also, I had not completed university courses outside the sciences and had no high school transcripts, yet I wanted to enter a humanities program. The whole thing was punted to the Director of Admissions who gave me a tentative admission. This qualification was never removed from my computerized record which, after my graduation, still shows me with a provisional acceptance.

Once in the exalted position of a second bachelor’s degree student, I discovered, piecemeal, that I was excused from some otherwise obligatory elementary General Education (GE) courses, the Entry Level Mathematics Exam, and the two-unit PE requirement. On the other hand, I was not excused from taking one course in each of three advanced GE categories, nor the six-unit “American Institutions” system-wide requirement. Another hurdle proved to be the Writing Skills Test (WST). The good news was that I was excused from this requirement as a second bachelor’s degree student. The bad news was that the Foreign Languages Department had a supposedly inviolable graduation requirement that one complete an advanced Spanish writing course for which the WST is a prerequisite. Fortunately, one of the professors went to bat for me, and the compromise was struck that they would waive the course in my case if I took the basic WST and received a high enough score. This proved not very demanding for an English-speaking college graduate and I breathed a sigh of relief. Nevertheless, I was confused by the apparent disconnect between successfully taking a basic WST in English and a Spanish writing course, until I later discovered the linguists’ perspective. It has been their experience that the ability to write acceptably in one’s own native language translates reliably to a comparable ability to construct sentences and convey concepts in another, given an adequate command of the necessary grammar and vocabulary.

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So two and a half years later, I have been through the SJSU wringer, completing the prerequisite total units and emerging with a substantial amount of information on subjects as diverse as Prehistoric Life, Western Civilization, and America Past and Present, as well as the various courses in Latin American History for my minor. As an immigrant, I have even learned interesting details about the history of my adopted country in which I have lived for more than 35 years. To these were added the remaining 29 units in Spanish Literature, Linguistics and Culture for the major (these conducted in Spanish). Along the way, there was a year of French, brushing up four or five years taken at high school and before that had long ago rusted from disuse.

All of this shows on my transcript. What does not appear is the extraordinary experience and privilege of participating in classes with today’s student generation. At SJSU, many are there not because of failing to pass through the admissions filter at more prestigious places, but for simple financial reasons. The majority of my classmates have jobs and some also have families. The least expensive route to graduation is two years at a junior college, then two more at CSU. Their determination and ability to succeed, despite considerable social disadvantages in many cases, is a lesson in itself and bodes well for the future of our state. Many are the first in their family to attend university. Equally interesting is the ethnic diversity and its distribution between classes. For example, I am continuing in a master’s program (still under the “Over Sixty” umbrella), and our Latin American Literature class happens to be held in the science building this semester for room scheduling reasons. We follow a database management class in the Computer Science Department. As they file out, it is noticeable that the majority of those students are Asians. This contrasts so markedly with our predominantly Latino group, who are planning to become teachers, translators, interpreters, and academics or to pursue careers in state agencies, international business, broadcasting, journalism and many other fields. In both cases I suspect the program choice in part reflects areas of study considered meritorious in their parents’ countries of origin. When I read statistics in the newspapers about the average incomes of different ethnic groups, I cannot help thinking back to the initial self-selection evident in these two classes crossing in the Duncan Hall corridor. One wonders to what extent they have thought about later incomes, as youngsters selecting careers in their undergraduate years.

The frequently asked question as to what I will “do with it” when I finish completely misses the point. Attendance at seminars in a subject of interest, without any pressure as to outcome, can be a most enjoyable experience—far removed from the grind of one’s prior college days. It is this journey that is a

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large part of the objective. Add to this an education in reading and thinking in a new and intriguing area of interest, and one has an end in itself. The “Over Sixty Program” has provided this old codger great satisfaction outside medicine, to be used to whatever extent one might wish in the remaining years. The goal is to complete an M.A. thesis by my eightieth birthday. The pursuit of further information should keep me off the streets thereafter, should that challenge arise. I know that many anesthesiologists would not enjoy such an organized approach to retirement activity. Nevertheless I hope that this article has drawn some readers’ attention to the options available at little cost to those who have dutifully paid their state taxes during a professional lifetime. There is a potpourri of courses waiting to be sampled. Come on in, the water is warm!

- ¹ The Code consists of regulations that have been “formally adopted by state agencies, reviewed and approved by the Office of Administrative Law, and filed with the Secretary of State.” Of 28 such “titles,” Title 5 deals with Education.
- ² This program was extremely appealing when compared with the more than \$40,000 per annum at the institution at which I have an emeritus title!
- ³ There may be an extra “lab fee” for a photography class.

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