

The Golden Handshake: Who Will Heed The Siren Call?

SARA TURNER, *Social Welfare*

Under the provisions of AB 876, two additional years of service credit is the carrot currently being offered to faculty who choose "early" retirement between March 27 and June 29, 1980. While some have criticized the new law for being very costly — around \$10,000 for the rest of each retiree's life span — many faculty find that after a certain age and tenure, they are simply laboring for Carterian peanuts or almost paying the state to work for it.

If and how individuals elect to relieve the University of its embarrassment of excess faculty-power varies. There are alternative exits out of the house of knowledge. Some may decide to push the button and eject; others may wish to emerge from the Ivory Tower by a series of transitions lest they be transmogrified by sudden exposure to outside air. One worries about the winds of inflation. Another frets about jeopardizing tax-free Social Security benefits by working a single quarter of the academic year. The "burnt out prof" wants out at any price. New careers beckon virtuosi. There are well adjusted "buffalo-heads" who look forward to spending late maturity in green pastures or golf courses. Motives are not monothetic. It all depends. The following brief report may allay the concerns of some eligible faculty who decide to clasp the "golden handshake" as an exit visa.

"What do you suppose our own retired colleagues think about retirement?" A casual comment from a sociologist to a social worker precipitated a twenty-question survey of 56 former HSU faculty and staff members to ascertain just that.¹ Seventy-nine percent responded, most within two weeks. Assured confidentiality, our respondents shared some of their very personal feelings about their present status. They ranged in age from 57 to 88 and had been retired from one to 29 years.

The most outstanding result obtained from the

questionnaires was the high state of morale among the respondents. *None* reported lowered spirit due to retirement. While nineteen (out of 44 replies) recorded simply no regrets, twenty-three (54 percent) claimed that they were happier in post-collegiate existence. Only one person reported that life was now less satisfying due to a severely handicapping physical condition.

Ex-HSU faculty are not Pollyannas. Similar conclusions are found in scientifically conducted investigations. For example, there is a study, published in 1977, of 549 retirees from the University of California system. The researchers found them to be mostly happy, active and financially comfortable.² Inflation, of course, has accelerated since then. Let us look at the Humboldt picture.

Only one person indicated that circumstances were "strained; really don't have enough to meet basic needs." An additional six considered their circumstances to be "adequate; nothing extra, but doing okay." The overwhelming majority (82 percent) said they were "really comfortable; enough for extras" and a remarkable seven percent considered themselves "rich." For those who identified additional cost needs, items checked included medical and transportation costs, food and housing expenses, with no concentration in any particular category.

We asked how long respondents had worked for HSU and over half indicated it had been twenty or more years. Five had been here less than ten years and the remainder between ten and twenty. The reasons for retirement ranged from age to health, other business interests, personal, and could include a combination of those factors. For most, it was a combination of reasons.

Our retired colleagues are healthy, at least as reflected by those who responded. Only one is

severely handicapped; fourteen have moderate limitations from chronic conditions, and the rest "do anything I want."

About half are quite active: twenty-two spend six hours or more weekly away from home in various activities and, for fourteen, it is fifteen or more hours weekly. The kinds of activities identified included writing, tutoring, civic and cultural affairs, legal and library work, and various art endeavors. For the rest, it is substantially less, and only a few (twelve) work on a regular basis, paid or unpaid, elsewhere.

Not many of our retired families have relatives close enough to visit frequently. All who had one or more kin within fifty miles said they saw them weekly; for others, it was monthly or "very rarely." It is obvious that most of us expect our children to move away, as they establish their own homes with employment elsewhere.

Church is not an institution of significance for many. Twenty-five never attend; ten go weekly; seven go monthly. Several persons did not respond.

We wondered what activities gave our colleagues the greatest pleasure in life. Not surprisingly, reading led the list. Travel was identified by many, followed by gardening, visiting friends, television — all the things most of us enjoy throughout our lives. Retirees keep up their subscriptions; twenty-five continue to get five or more periodicals.

An open ended question, "Can you think of anything you could have done *before* retirement that would have improved things for you *after* retirement?" brought some thoughtful, lengthy notes. Preretirement sessions offered by HSU's Personnel Department were helpful, but one person suggested that a great improvement would be the discussion of intangibles, such as forming a new self-concept, once the role of teacher is gone. Inclusion of a spouse would have helped a few. A recent study of four-hundred retired Canadian teachers³ revealed that for housewives, the major shift for women after a spouses' retirement was increased accommodation to their husband's needs. It is surprising that teachers, who have longer summer vacations than most professionals, should not get some advance practice in living with their spouses for periods of time outside a formal work structure.

A woman in a retirement community states, "I loved my job at Humboldt and was not really ready to retire myself, but wanted to share activities with my husband (who did so). . . I have

also loved retirement and the opportunity to bring pleasure to many of our residents who cannot get out very much. My job as program chairman has enabled me to make life pleasanter for them." A man writes, "I *could* have gotten even an earlier start on my personal investment activities; other than that, I think we planned well and generally wisely. We began planning our new life after work at least five years before I left HSU." Many others expressed the same dominant theme: they are alive and doing well in retirement.

Although each question was left unanswered by at least one respondent, the writer was delighted by the prompt, enthusiastic return of the questionnaires. Almost all indicated they they were willing to be interviewed, although this was impossible because of publication deadline. There were no "sour grapes." One, recently retired, wished he had known in advance about the "golden handshake." (There are estimates that it will increase retirement benefits on an average of \$10,000 per employee.) However, our colleagues shared generously of their experiences, and for them, at least, there have been few regrets.

The three month limitation for action under AB 876 means that those eligible must begin now to consider options. Will it be you? Decisions! Decisions!

FOOTNOTES

¹I should like to thank Jim Carroll for criticisms and suggestions.

²Patton, Carl V., "Early Retirement in Academia," *Gerontologist*, (1977), 17, 347-54.

³Keating, Norah C. and Priscilla Cole, *Gerontologist*, (1980), 20, 84-89.