EPIC
(Emeritus Professors in Columbia)
<http://www.professorsemeritus.columbia.edu>
Notes by Lalla R. Grimes

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2015

“NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EMERITUS PROFESSORS IN COLUMBIA”

Douglas Chalmers, President pro tem of EPIC, welcomed the attendees and introduced and expressed gratitude to the outgoing President, Seymour Topping, for serving as President of EPIC over the past ten years, for overseeing its expansion, and for furthering the quality of EPIC as a community and fellowship of and for emeriti faculty.

Chalmers also expressed gratitude to Ene Sirvet, who served as the Administrator of EPIC for at least ten years. He noted that she is still being cared for in nursing home and could not attend today's meeting. Lalla Grimes has her contact information.

Chalmers then gave some background on himself, noting that his career at Columbia dates back to 1966 and so now covers 50 years. He retired ten years ago from the Political Science Department. He is still teaching in the Columbia College Core Curriculum and is Executive Director of the Society of Senior Scholars.

[The Society of Senior Scholars brings together scholar-teachers, who, after retirement, continue teaching part-time at Columbia University in its general education programs. Members teach in Columbia’s renowned undergraduate Core Curriculum, other related undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as colloquia at the Heyman Center for its alumni/ae supporters. The Scholars also organize lectures and discussions on issues of common interest. Established in 1988 at the Heyman Center for the Humanities, the Society is funded by grants from the Mellon Foundation supplemented by gifts from other donors. http://seniorscholars.columbia.edu]

For the past year and a half Chalmers has served as Special Assistant to the Provost, John Coatsworth, on Faculty Retirement because it had become clear that faculty approaching retirement did not know much about the process. In this capacity he has communicated with 150 faculty members to advise them on retirement choices.

Chalmers then introduced Kay Achar, who is taking over as the Administrator of EPIC on Chalmers’ interim EPIC leadership team. Achar also serves as the Academic Department Administrator for the Department of Political Science [kea6@columbia.edu, 212-854-6488; 714 International Affairs Building].

Chalmers then asked the attendees to identify themselves: Leslie Beebe, Barbara Black, Paul Carter, Lou Cleveland, William Glaser, Carolyn Greenberg, Lalla Grimes, Robert Hanning, Maristella Lorch, Carol Pantuck, Eugene Pantuck, Richard Pierson, Fran Pritchett, Peter Rothstein, Mischa Schwartz, Gary Shapiro, Henry Smith,
Christine Wade, Harvey, Weiss, Joanna Williams, Frank Wolf, and Seymour Topping.

Chalmers said he had convened this meeting to get input about what EPIC can do for emeriti faculty at Columbia, saying that he prefers that term rather than "retirees" as it signifies a new phase in professional life rather than a withdrawal from it. [although note that membership in EPIC is not limited to emeritus professors – see the Charter, Article III http://www.professorsemeritus.columbia.edu/about-us#Charter%20of%20EPIC]

He explained that he, Paul Carter and Seymour Topping had composed a memo about the new things EPIC might do. He noted that other academic institutions around the country have also established EPIC-like communities. It is clear that demographics are contributing to the growth of the number of faculty retirees, their longer lifespans, and their widely divergent areas of interest and activity. Emeriti don't just want to talk to other retirees: they want to engage in a variety of activities. Meeting the needs of communities of emeriti is no simple matter.

Chalmers has thought about what emeriti might want and how to achieve those goals. He has sorted his ideas under four categories of activities for emeriti, which he refers to by the pneumonic CASL:

C = COMMUNITY – EPIC’s regular bi-weekly meetings and talks since its establishment in 1998 have created a community for emeriti. EPIC has collaborated with the Society of Senior Scholars in arranging for annual sessions with Columbia University Human Resources (CUHR) Benefits personnel about health care insurance options for retirees. He foresees the possibility of similar sessions with investment specialists from TIAA-CREF and Vanguard. He foresees meetings focused on issues of housing for emeriti.

Another aspect of community is recognition of the emeriti population and its value to the greater Columbia community; fostering this can be an important function for EPIC. Retirees no longer withdraw and “drop out” as they may have been perceived to do in past decades: emeriti now often remain vibrant, active, and capable of valuable contributions to the university community. Chalmers sees certain social events (such as an annual meeting/reception for EPIC members, possibly hosted by the Provost and attended by senior central administrators) as a possible means for greater recognition of emeriti.

A = ADVOCACY – EPIC can serve as a voice speaking for emeriti and their concerns. Space allocation has long been an issue at Columbia, and now the opening of the Manhattanville Campus offers new opportunities for those groups that are proactive. Chalmers said he mentioned to the Provost recently that he could see EPIC taking over space on the top two floors of Uris Hall once the Business School relocates to its new building on the Manhattanville Campus. Coatsworth smiled and said, “Sure, of course, everybody wants that…” Work will be needed to establish space for emeriti and EPIC on campus.
EPIC could advocate for increased research and travel funds for emeriti faculty or at least publicize opportunities thus serving as a "stimulator" in this area and help identify resources and perhaps donors. EPIC could advocate for teaching awards for emeriti instructors, not just for "active" faculty. EPIC has an immediate role to play in speaking up for emeriti faculty at the Columbia University Medical Center (CUMC) where <...@columbia.edu> email addresses are scheduled to be discontinued for emeriti faculty as of March 1, 2015, in order to remediate a data breach a few years ago that resulted in $4.8 million HIPAA settlements for the University. This is according to a recent email message received by most CUMC emeriti, despite the fact that continued use of the Columbia email systems has been guaranteed as a retirement benefit. Chalmers is already aware of this issue and has received some 30 emails from CUMC emeriti about it. He thinks the decision-makers in this matter were unaware of how important Columbia email access is to emeriti. He noted that it is a complicated technical issue involving shifting servers. He believes that Columbia University Information Technology (CUIT) managers, the Provost and the various deans involved are aware of the severe discontent of CUMC emeriti about this; he is hopeful that a satisfactory resolution of the problem can be reached but is not now sure of the outcome.

EPIC can also be an advocate for emeriti in navigating health insurance snafus, such as the one recently identified by an attendee, Carolyn Greenberg, who found that claims she submitted in January 2015 were not being processed "seamlessly" by UnitedHealthCare (UHC), as had been promised by CUHR when it announced that the University was transitioning retirees from the CIGNA indemnity plan to a UHC indemnity plan as their secondary insurer after Medicare. UHC has no record at all of January claims, and the resolution can only be achieved by Columbia, not by any individual. Greenberg has spoken with Lynn Ball at the CUHR Benefits Office. Medicare should be sending claims to UHC via an automatic "cross-over," but this is not happening. As it now stands, the burden is on individual retirees to arrange to have their doctors submit claims directly to UHC. Chalmers agreed that EPIC should play an advocacy role in this kind of situation. He said that he has a good relationship with Fiona McLennan, Assistant VP for Benefits, at CUHR and he will contact her about this. (Update: McLennan later promised to clear it up.)

A question was posed about who gets EPIC notifications. Achar noted that permission from the Provost's Office is required to send mass email messages to all CU faculty retirees (for example, the message about this meeting was sent to a distribution list of 700 but needed clearance). This is cumbersome administratively. There is much more flexibility in sending messages to "EPIC members." Achar will add the emails of all those in attendance today to the EPIC membership list.

Another attendee raised the issue of post-retirement publications and suggested that EPIC could coordinate a bibliography of emeriti publications.
S = SERVICE – EPIC can and should play a role in fostering contributions by emeriti faculty to the greater university community by a variety of mechanisms: the mentoring of junior faculty and graduate students; offering advice about the process of retirement to faculty members approaching that time (both good and bad experiences).

L = LINKAGES – EPIC can and should facilitate linkages for emeriti to different organizations on campus such as: research centers and institutes, University Seminars < http://universityseminars.columbia.edu>, the Earth Institute of Columbia < http://www.earthinstitute.columbia.edu>, the Columbia Global Centers < http://globalcenters.columbia.edu/>, etc. EPIC can help emeriti find out about possibilities for post-retirement teaching, working either with their own department chairs and deans or through something like the The School of Continuing Education <http://ce.columbia.edu>, Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning < http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu> or Community Impact <http://columbia.edu/cu/ci/>. EPIC could post such teaching options on its website or publicize them via targeted emails or by sponsoring meetings with various teaching groups. Barbara Black later expressed interest in opportunities for emeriti to continue teaching. EPIC can also link emeriti to options for taking courses or workshops or undertaking specialized training.

Chalmers then opened the floor to discussion about “what EPIC ought to do” to achieve these or other goals.

Grimes expressed the hope that biweekly presentations by EPIC members would continue, and Chalmers acknowledged the value in this. Frank Wolf suggested that advanced graduate students be invited to make brief presentations about their dissertation work at EPIC meetings, fostering “multi-generationalism.”

Maristella Lorch interjected that when EPIC was founded in 1998, Sam Devons and the other original founders posed questions about how emeriti could be useful to themselves and to one another. She thanked Chalmers for taking on the leadership of EPIC and also thanked Seymour Topping for his past service. She also expressed gratitude to Ene Sirvet for her devoted service over many years. She acknowledged that conditions change over time and that the EPIC leadership must be ready to move forward. She suggested establishing a small planning committee to follow up on the points raised today and stressed her willingness to work for EPIC. Chalmers agreed that EPIC leadership could benefit from “new blood” and expressed a hope that a newly constituted EPIC Steering Committee could provide the ideas and energy needed.

Mischa Schwartz suggested inviting regular faculty, in addition to graduate students, to address EPIC meetings in the interest of multi-generationalism and to better link emeriti with what is going on today in the university. Chalmers agreed and noted
that "blogs" might be utilized; an updating and reinvigorating of the existing EPIC website could also help emeriti stay actively connected to the university at large <http://www.professorsemeritus.columbia.edu>.

Schwartz went on to suggest scheduling EPIC activities beyond talks that would contribute to intellectual stimulation for emeriti. He noted that not residing locally means that evening programs (such as the University Seminars) are not an option for him, and this may be the case for other emeriti. He felt emeriti should be encouraged and informed about auditing courses and even suggested that EPIC should try to organize short-term courses, perhaps taught by EPIC members, for emeriti on subjects such as art history. EPIC might also function as a clearing-house for information about taking courses at other area institutions. Columbia’s School of Continuing Education has rich offerings but they can be expensive <http://www.ce.columbia.edu/>. Chalmers later agreed on the value of short-term courses. He also raised the possibility of access for emeriti to genuinely interactive on-line courses using technologies such as Skype, which could reach retirees around the world. Schwartz stated a preference for face-to-face courses, and Chalmers feels there is a place for both. He mentioned the small on-line discussion courses favored by Robbie McClintock, Emeritus Professor in the Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education at Teachers College, as a model for this kind of offering for emeriti and others.

Chalmers mentioned the value for emeriti of involvement with the many University Seminars, which offer myriad ways to stay in touch with intellectual pursuits at Columbia and beyond <http://universityseminars.columbia.edu>

Seymour Topping expressed his delight that Chalmers is willing to take on the leadership of EPIC. He noted that Chalmers’ devotion and commitment to the university and its emeriti faculty are superlative and carry on the fine tradition of the work of the late Bob Belknap, whose estate is contributing to an endowment to support the ongoing work of EPIC. Speaking historically, Topping recalled having conversations years ago with then Provost Alan Brinkley about formal recognition and budgetary support for EPIC. Brinkley acknowledged at that time the need for retirees to have a voice at Columbia and felt that EPIC was an ideal organization to provide that voice. Topping expressed assurance that under Chalmers’ guidance, EPIC will attain that voice.

Chalmers again emphasized that it is up to us to define what we want for EPIC. Lou Cleveland stated that he values EPIC for the intellectual companionship it offers. He noted that unstructured EPIC meetings were often poorly attended; he surmised that might have been due to the fact that no one knew who would be attending. An on-line sign-up or registry function could help this.

Another attendee expressed her hope that EPIC would function as an advocate and strong collective voice for individual emeriti in gaining access to current central administrators on issues such as health insurance and the discontinuance of email.
service for retirees. She has found that the CUHR Benefits staff does not see some of these concerns as being official “benefits issues” and is therefore unwilling to advocate for emeriti. EPIC should speak up and protest the university's changing or reneging on arrangements formerly understood to be agreed-upon retirement benefits. Chalmers agreed that EPIC should function as a voice for emeriti to the Columbia administrative hierarchy. He strongly believes that emeriti can no longer be viewed as a "special breed apart” with no connection to or ability to contribute to the intellectual life of the university. Emeriti are living longer and staying more active than ever before and can contribute!

Lorch mentioned that linkages to university alumni are also important for emeriti. EPIC could/should think about coordinating with the Columbia Alumni Association in this regard and perhaps to identify potential alumni donors who could support EPIC. Emeriti might travel to meet with and speak to Columbia alumni clubs, as she has done. She lamented that representatives of the humanist fields of academia seem to have faded out of EPIC and must be “waked up.” Chalmers agreed that he would like to see greater involvement in EPIC on the part of the members of the Society of Senior Scholars, a group of humanists.

Carter said that he sees Chalmers’s ideas as being well developed and well organized; they and the suggestions that have been made at this meeting are all worth pursuing. But the implementation of these pursuits will require organization and structure as well as financial resources. EPIC leaders will soon need to appeal to the university’s senior administrators to recognize EPIC as the leading organization representing emeriti and to support it as such with a budget and staff and other resources so that EPIC can move forward to realize some of the ideas discussed today.

Chalmers agreed with Carter’s views. He noted that EPIC should represent not only Columbia University emeriti, including those of the CUMC, but also those of Barnard, Teachers College, and Union Theological Seminary. EPIC can push to collect dues from its members but will likely need more resources to succeed. As mentioned earlier, EPIC can and should link with the Columbia Alumni Association to identify alumni donors interested in supporting its efforts. Chalmers sees EPIC as representing the wave of the future for emeriti as they enter what Provost Coatsworth has referred to as “the new phase of our professional careers.” Chalmers reiterated that the immediate challenge is to reach an agreement on the goals for EPIC and then move forward to marshal facilities and resources to realize these goals.

Regarding service and teaching by emeriti, Chalmers asked if EPIC should schedule brain-storming meetings like this one with representatives of campus organizations for which emeriti could teach. If not face-to-face meetings about teaching opportunities for emeriti, Chalmers asked what kinds of linkages would be most helpful to EPIC members – website postings? email blasts?
Wolf agreed that a reformed and re-invigorated EPIC Steering Committee was a good way to proceed. Members of the Steering Committee must be willing themselves to assume responsibility for some EPIC endeavors and activities. Steering Committee members must be willing to put their money where their mouth is, lest the organizational responsibilities fall too heavily on Chalmers and Achar.

Chalmers stated that he plans to submit an amendment to the EPIC Charter establishing term limits for the Presidency to ensure periodic “new blood” in the EPIC leadership. EPIC needs to be aware of leadership succession strategies in order to flourish now and in the future, recognizing that none of us lives forever. He noted that Grimes will be providing minutes of this meeting and that they will be distributed by email to the attendees and posted on the EPIC website.

An attendee noted the importance for emeriti of maintaining lively relationships with their original departments so that two-way nurturing can take place. Emeriti should consider taking graduate students to lunch and can of course serve on dissertation committees, even if they cannot sponsor graduate students directly. EPIC can play a role in helping departments better utilize the skills and knowledge of emeriti and can leverage what departments have to offer to other emeriti.

Dick Pierson noted that as a field geriatrics, recognized as late as the 1980s, is now a thriving discipline. He suggested the establishment of an EPIC Health Committee drawing on the expertise of geriatric specialists at CUMC, which would also strengthen the linkages between the Morningside Campus and the CUMC. The age population pyramid of CU faculty has changed dramatically over the last 30 years with many more older retirees living longer and remaining active both physically and mentally, due not only to demographics but also to better health care. Chalmers noted that a Butler Columbia Aging Center exists at the Mailman School of Public Health <http://www.mailman.columbia.edu/> under the directorship of Ursula Staudinger; EPIC could look into linkages with it.

Achar encouraged attendees to visit the EPIC website at <professorsemeritus.columbia.edu> and to communicate thoughts and comments to her <kea6@columbia.edu> and/or to Chalmers chalmers@columbia.edu.

Carter urged Chalmers to set up a strong EPIC Steering Committee as soon as possible and said that Chalmers should consider himself a nominating committee of one. No one objected. Chalmers asked that anyone interested in serving on the Steering Committee should contact him. Membership on the Steering Committee need not be long-term; the Steering Committee should be viewed as a group getting together to think and talk about the next steps for EPIC.

At 1:35 PM the meeting adjourned so that attendees could proceed to lunch on the 4th floor of Faculty House for continued discussions and fellowship.