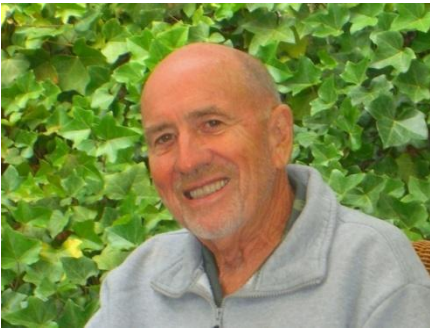


End Note: Dr. Jack Bessire – A Life of Service to Students

Article By:

Dr. Grace N. Mitchell has replaced Dr. Bessire as President of PPL (Professional Personnel Leasing, Inc), a firm that has served California Community Colleges since 1978 by placing interim administrators, conducting executive searches, educational master plans and serving in many other consulting roles. Dr. Mitchell has been with PPL since her retirement in 1999 as President/ Superintendent of Cuesta College, San Luis Obispo Community College District. Dr. Mitchell may be contacted at (805) 235-3500 or her E Mail gracenmb@aol.com. The PPL web site is: www.pplpros.com.



Abstract:

This is a remembrance of Dr. Jack Bessire, who was a well respected administrator and leader in the Community College system, serving at Monterey Peninsula College as the Chief Student Service Officer and President. He later became President of PPL, Professional Personnel Leasing, and a firm that has assisted colleges in serving students for over thirty years. His years of service are captured in this End Note very nicely by Dr. Grace Mitchell.

Article:

One of the most respected, admired and loved administrators in the California Community College system passed away in January 2010. To those who knew him well, Jack Bessire was a loyal friend, a devoted family man, a man of principle, a man of peace and, from what I hear, a tough golf and tennis opponent. From each person who knew Jack there might be another description; in sum, he was a Renaissance man. But probably most important to his professional life and to those who knew him as a colleague, Jack Bessire was a role model for the student-centered administrator.

A few days ago, I came across words that Jack had written when he retired after sixteen years as Editor of AdCom, the ACCCA Newsletter. I also found remarks he had made at Monterey Peninsula College when he was President in the year he planned to retire. It seemed clear to me, after working with him, hearing from his former colleagues and from his friends, and meeting his family that Jack could best be described by using his own words. His strengths, philosophy and warmth are present in a way only he could express.

Jack began his 37-year career in community colleges at a time when (in his words) "a community college campus was much different than it is now." He entitled those days "the good old paternalistic days." With his usual mixture of wit, sarcasm and love, he described that period with phrases like: "no interview committees...no shared governance...no Brown Act regulations...no salary schedules." The President's "annual Christmas card would let you know if you were going to get a raise...an individual matter."

Lest you picture Jack as someone who missed those "good old paternalistic days", let me assure you that he goes on to describe what he loved about community colleges from the day he arrived in California and discovered "the real value and importance of California's educational experiment..."

He writes knowledgeably about what was still missing in those so-called "golden days" of community colleges and of the challenges community colleges faced over the years from the 1960's, through the 70's, to Prop 13, through the increasing loss of support for community colleges and up to the time of his retirement. But what he describes most vividly and most consistently was his passion: the state of the college student body and the efforts made to change it and to support student learning needs.

Again, in his words: "...our student populations were not as diverse as they might be. One of the barriers to the underserved populations was the lack of focus on serving them more effectively." At Monterey Peninsula College, Jack was instrumental in starting an EOPS program before there was state funding available, "going door to door with students in Carmel asking for donations to run the program and we used the motto 'Learn, Baby, Learn.'"

They were successful in recruiting students, but "the campus was not ready."

Throughout his career, Jack kept his eye on the reason community colleges exist, frequently pointing out to a group assembled that what we do should be guided by student needs. In his remarks, he speaks of the period following student protests as the period when the community college "truly opened its doors to all students."

In his writing, he also describes the unfortunate, perennial struggle between serving the needs of students and the ups and downs of community college funding, some related to various legislative changes such as AB 1725. Jack realized when he retired from "active duty" as an administrator that there was still a great deal to do to make the community college what it was intended to be by the people who first envisioned the Master Plan for Higher Education.

He witnessed many attempts at "reform" in the California Community College system during his professional life. But Jack was a realist. To use his words: "Have we been reformed as a result of these changes?" He saw little or no evidence that students were more successful. He saw a "constant push for reform and the reforms do not focus on our effectiveness or on our uniqueness." Jack saw a community college system that is unique and whose excellence "is marked by what should be characterized as a TLC environment." His definition of TLC was also unique: "teaching, learning and caring."

He found support for his beliefs and his hopes for community colleges in such distinguished writers as Professor Charles Muscatine and John Gardner who both encouraged community colleges to strive for excellence in their own way and not to use the four year college as a model.

Muscatine is quoted in response to a question posed by the California Academic Senate Newsletter in 1985: "Whatever it does, community college faculty should resist as much as possible being wagged by the four-year curricula...You should...be letting them know that there are better ways to do it and offering on the basis of your unrivaled teaching experience to collaborate on the first two years of a new curriculum."

John Gardner supported "a new way of thinking about excellence in higher education...."

Jack quotes Gardner: "An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns plumbing.....and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy....will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water."

Jack passed away in January after serving for some fifteen years during his "retirement" as President of PPL, Professional Personnel Leasing, a firm that has assisted colleges in serving students for over thirty years.

Jack Bessire is missed. He spent his life in service to students. We should be guided by his student-centered philosophy. We will miss his wisdom, his mentoring, his calm and determined way of getting things done, his strong belief in the system he loved, his support of colleagues and friends, and his friendship.

