An Interview with Dr. Joe Norbeck

Founding Director of College of Engineering – Center for Environmental Research and Technology
Emeritus Professor of Chemical and Environmental Engineering
Former Director of Environmental Research Institute
Former W. Ruel Johnson Professor

“It was the same ritual on Sunday evenings: sit down in front of the phone, put on the glasses, pick up the list of applicants, pick up the receiver, and dial . . . and talk . . . and dial . . . and talk . . . to every parent, every student who expressed interest in the College of Engineering. (UC Regents’ Scholars did receive particular attention, it was confessed.)

Sometimes, the parents said they weren’t interested because the college was not ABET-accredited. Dr. Joe Norbeck corrected them and then set out discovering how to achieve it!

“I came from industry,” Norbeck confessed. “I wasn’t necessarily skilled in what it takes to run a college!” (For that knowledge, he credited Dr. Mark Matsumoto as “a godsend; a very significant individual in the early days.”)

Norbeck’s arrival and ensuing legacy to UC Riverside is an interesting life story that—as with many paths that originally were thought to be direct—resulted in twists and turns, with surprises, unexpected outcomes, and one exceptionally positive meeting with a bittersweet note.

His expertise came from being the head of the chemistry department at Ford Motor Company in Michigan. One day in 1989 or ’90, Norbeck’s supervisor mentioned something about . . . and then suggested, “They’re going to put together some kind of center; why don’t you go out and check ‘em out?”

Thinking it was going to be more of a facility for mechanical engineering and crashing cars, Norbeck described meeting with the UCR folks and his advice: “If it was me, what I’d do is build a laboratory that addresses environmental issues, and here are the areas you should go into,” adding that he thought Dean Susan Hackwood had the same idea regarding atmospheric processes, emission measurements, and fuels. “You do this,” he continued, “and get the right director—the key is the right director . . . and I’ll help you identify him!—then this may go.”

Norbeck envisioned a place that would help mitigate the growing interface of debate between regulatory communities and industry. He repeated, “If you do it, I’ll get you the guys to help you: Ford, GM, Arco—which is a very important player—Chevron, the EPA, South Coast Air Quality, the California Air Resources Board, and then I went home.”

He gave UCR leads to follow, although he thought that “UCR didn’t have much knowledge in the government/industry interface.” He smiled and said, “I forgot about it, out of sight, out of mind, that was it, although I always liked Riverside.” What he didn’t notice was that Hackwood had been taking very good notes.

Flash forward six or eight months and back at UCR, Chancellor Rosemary Schraer and Dean Hackwood sat down to make a

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This time, Norbeck was on the receiving end as they told him, “We did everything you told us to do, and guess what? You’re the guy!”

His retort? “Oh no, I’m not!” So apparently remembering his impression that he “always liked Riverside,” Norbeck went to Bill Ford, Jr., and said he had an offer from UCR, “If I leave, you are going to have to give me some money!” Ford’s Vice President of Environment Affairs Helen Petraskaus replied soothingly, “Do it for five years and come back; it will be great training for you.” She also reasoned with Norbeck, “If you can get GM to join in, we’ll go; and if we go, Arco will go.” (As a result, Ford Motor Company pledged $10 million to CE-CERT in 1994.)

Looking back on that plot twist in Michigan, Norbeck said, “And that’s the way it was supposed to be. We wanted to do it because it was important. There was a clean sheet of paper at UCR’s College of Engineering. I didn’t know what I was getting into, but we went forward anyway.”

In those days, there was no other independent group—the concept of an “honest broker”—in the country, so Norbeck started going around, trying to get money as well as sell the concept. He remembered Chuck Imbrecht of the California Energy Commission saying during their meeting: “This is fantastic! We need this! Call Bob Presley and tell him to put in four million of PVEA money!” That was Robert Presley, Riverside’s long-time representative to California’s State Senate, who helped form the South Coast Air Quality Management District, and in reference to money available from the state’s Petroleum Violation Escrow Account; it was collected from fines levied against oil companies regarding emissions from their facilities.

“We were so excited,” Norbeck continued. “We called back to the campus, only to find out that was the day that Rosemary (Chancellor Schraer) had a stroke and died. We were all excited, then we heard the tragedy.”

The resultant $4 million, however, was the money to get CE-CERT going. When challenged by some UCR faculty about the size of the PVEA grant, Norbeck boldly commented, “We are here to build a cathedral; the $4 million is for the stained glass windows!” (To date, CE-CERT has been awarded more than $200 million in research awards.)

The next fortuitous meeting was with Gordon Bourns and his father Marlan. Norbeck was speaking to high school students at the time and outlining the concept of CE-CERT and the new college. “Afterward, Gordon came up and said, ‘I may have a facility for you.’ We rented the Bourns facility, and things took off from there,” Norbeck said.

The impact of CE-CERT has been undeniable since those days, in combination “with a lot of talented people,” continuing with the support of UCR’s next chancellor, physicist Ray Orbach.

“We’ve had significant impact on several things,” Norbeck listed, in addition to concurrent regional and state accomplishments: “California has led the world in promulgating technology-enforcing regulations. Our atmospheric chamber is arguably the best in the world, the first of this size that allowed us to do a lot of work on particulates. The happy ending to Norbeck’s own story? “I’m pleased I made a career change 25 years ago; I look back on it and think I made the right choice, and the people around me think the same about themselves.”