

December 3, 1956

Mr. Morris W Watkins  
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Columbia University  
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Dear Mr. Watkins:

I am an optimist on the subject of retirement at 65 or 68. These ages are too low for some, too high for others. A principal function of universities is to develop brilliant young minds and provide the environment for their most effective use. This cannot be done if the university allows its departments and laboratories to be cluttered up with the aged.

The experience and judgment of the professor who retires are not lost. There is the ensemble of his published papers and books available to all who wish to read. He usually continues to write. The medical man or scientific worker who retires in fortunate possession of his full faculties and health is usually offered several alternatives such as directorships of research or visiting professorships, sometimes at a higher salary than his university paid him. There is at least one university with a retirement age of 70 which absorbs several younger emeriti of other universities annually, granting them visiting professorships to age 70 and paying the difference between the pension already received and full professorial salary - a very profitable arrangement for both professor and university.

I was fortunate in being able to continue research on the same scale and with almost no interruption, on an annual appointment as visiting professor at Rutgers University. If I suddenly become senile my university hosts are under no obligation to continue providing useful laboratory and office space, or if I run out of ideas or get tired I am under no obligation to continue. Columbia was very generous and allowed me to take a truckload of more or less specialized equipment along, so that our new laboratories were operating smoothly in an unbelievably short time. The various granting agencies, government and private, happily have no prejudice against "principal investigators" in the emeritus category.

With regard to your specific questions, I have already answered some of them. I know of one industrial firm that has made available a laboratory and technician to a long since retired professor of pharmacology. Another retired biochemist was a consultant to several industries until his death.

Mr. Morris W. Watkins

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I do not know what the universities are doing about upgrading retirement incomes to meet increased living costs. Two research institutes that I know about have done so.

As indicated above, I think the University's mandatory retirement procedure is a just and fair one. No system should be inflexible, and on rare occasions exceptions should be and are being made.

My twenty-seven years of pre-emeritus activity at Columbia were very happy ones and the transition to the emeritus status was made with a tact and generosity that minimized the inevitable pangs of the physical separation. Intellectually, of course, I remain a loyal member of the Columbia community.

You may quote any of the above that you wish.

Sincerely yours,

Michael Heidelberger

MH:DP