A new beginning: University’s Retired Faculty Association looks to grow membership, programming, mission

3/24/2016 | By: John Trent |

For many faculty members, the hardest thing about stepping away from long careers spent in teaching, research and outreach isn't necessarily a feeling of finality.

Retirement, says Neal Ferguson, dean emeritus of the College of Extended Studies, is more about finding that important, natural next step in a person's effort to remain vital, engaged and productive.

When Ferguson reached emeritus status in 2015, one of his first thoughts centered on the University.

He remembers thinking, and actually mentioning to University President Marc Johnson in a conversation not long ago, "I want to stay involved with the University." To which Johnson quickly saw an opportunity.

"Knowing Neal, and knowing his ability to get things done, taking his wish and then turning it into action seemed like a natural next step," Johnson recalls. "In a short period of time, it's been remarkable to see the progress that has been made by Neal and his wife, Roberta, and the group of members of our Retired Faculty Association. At every level, at every period of life, we want people to remain actively engaged with our University. The effort thus far by Neal and the Retired Faculty Association to help create this involvement by our emeriti has been fantastic."

As Johnson says, Ferguson and dozens of other retired University faculty who are now members of the University of Nevada, Reno Retired Faculty Association (UNR RFA) have made impressive inroads in a short period of time. The organization, which has been in existence since last fall, is comprised of retired academic and administrative faculty, their spouses and partners, who wish to maintain a productive relationship with the University.

Along with his wife, Roberta, a local psychologist and former instructor in the Department of Psychology, as well as a working group of key members whose experience at the University touches many disciplines and experiences, Ferguson has been busily studying other retirement organizations at other colleges and universities across the country. Already, an operational infrastructure has been formed. This is leading to programming and events that promise to raise awareness not only for the RFA, but also to facilitate important dialogue about retirement, aging, and how individuals can stay involved with their educational organization once they turn in their office keys and apply for an emeritus parking pass.

The RFA will hold a "launch" event on Tuesday, March 29, from 3-5 p.m. in the Great Room of the Joe Crowley Student Union. Retired faculty, their spouses, and members of the campus community are all invited.

"This has been a great experience for us," Roberta says. "We're gaining a better understanding of how you can transform retirement and re-write life's next chapter."

The Fergusons have reached out to local groups and University assets such as the Sanford Center for Aging’s RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer) program. The hope is to partner with an outreach arm such as RSVP to develop a clear volunteer agenda for University retirees, which would involve them in key community issues and create greater connection with the community at large.

"The people at the Sanford Center have told us that they would like to get rid of the word 'retirement'," Roberta explains. "The word 'retirement' suggests a withdrawal. Many of us who were faculty or are interested in the University don't see it that way at all."
Adds Neal: "One's involvement or interest in the place they worked shouldn't have a termination date."

The University is joining a growing number of colleges and universities that are encouraging such involvement. The University of Southern California was one of the first to lead the way in the 1940s. Closer to home, the University of California, Davis, originated its first such organization in 1989. The possibilities are endless, the Fergusons add. UC-Davis, for example, has its own retirement center, which helps emeriti and their families with an array of services, from better understanding health care to retirement fund options to community involvement.

The University's organization, Ferguson says, "will be an advocate for faculty retirees. The University's sets of rights and privileges that are in place for people who have retired are comparable to many of the most prestigious organizations in the country. We want to raise awareness, and we want people to know that there are people in similar places in their lives who wish to stay involved with the life of our University ... and here are some activities, events, and programs that will help you do that."

Ideas, in addition to volunteering in the community, include mentoring opportunities with students and new faculty, who could benefit from emeriti's long association and experiences working with the University.

Also, Neal Ferguson says that the group's thinking must stretch beyond today.

"We're hoping that there are people who are going to retire in the coming years who will take this organization in ways we can't even imagine right now," he says. "That, to me, is exciting."

To that end, Ferguson, who has long been considered one of the University's finest humanities and history instructors, says in the not-too-distant future he would like to find funding for an oral and visual history project for retired faculty members. The project would tell the story of each retiring faculty member's career with the University.

"It would be a sort of 'Radio Lab' approach to create a kind of repository of history of institutional memory," Ferguson says. "It would be of benefit to the people who have spent their career at the University ... and it would be of benefit to the University itself ... a way for the University to say, 'We value what these wonderful people have done. Here are their stories.'"

Enrollment for the organization is ongoing, and membership for all members of the University community is encouraged. To find out more about the UNR Retired Faculty Association, go to http://www.unr.edu/retired.