An engineer with his own company and plenty to keep him busy, retiree Karl Bergey did not return to the classroom out of boredom. Without the obligations of committees, research proposals and advising, he could focus solely on something he loves—teaching.

EDITOR'S NOTE: When David Boren returned to the University of Oklahoma as its 13th president, he found a steadily rising enrollment and a faculty depleted by successive years of tight budgets, opportunities at other institutions and the recent retirement of a number of OU's best-known classroom teachers. With limited resources to solve the immediate problem, the new president turned to old friends; they did not let him down.

Several dozen retired University of Oklahoma faculty members are proving Thomas Wolfe wrong, working once again in their OU classrooms, reactivating their teaching skills and drawing upon invaluable years of experience.

Typical of the group are Karl Bergey, John Burr, Mary Jo Ruggles, Helmut Fischbeck, Marilyn Affleck and Rex Ellington, who bring with them knowledge as diverse as their backgrounds in engineering, chemistry, music, physics and sociology. All share a common enthusiasm—the joy of watching students learn. All have changed their lives to recapture that experience.

Bergey, who retired from the School of Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering in 1991, was already leading a busy, productive life when President David Boren invited him to return to limited teaching duty. As chairman of Bergey Windpower, the professor directs a company that manufactures and sells high-technology wind turbines to generate power. They are operating in all 50 states and 60 foreign countries.

Then why would he go back to teaching aircraft performance? "I enjoy teaching," he says simply, but he admits he had forgotten how hard he would have to work. "Not only have I had to update materials, I've had to tailor the course to meet the varied needs of the students. Since design projects are part of the course, they must be structured to reflect the work the students will do as professional engineers."

Bergey sees three benefits in retirees re-entering the classroom. "First, I don't face obligations such as committees, the preparation of research proposals and advising," he says. "When I was on the faculty, I found it challenging to teach and handle those things well. Now I focus on teaching—and only teaching. Thus, I have time to think and prepare. And you must prepare. Don't believe the myth of university faculty having an easy life of it. I've watched my faculty colleagues over the years, and I am convinced that university faculty work harder than people in business and industry.

"Second, retired faculty don't cost OU much in the way of salary," Bergey

A select group of emeritus professors have set aside their leisure-time activities and re-enlisted for another tour of duty.
University.

"And finally, retired faculty have another chance to teach undergraduate students," he says. "I remember the view of Victor Weisskopf, the Nobel laureate, on teaching at MIT. He believed that physicists could make one of their greatest contributions influencing gifted students early in their careers."

While acknowledging the value of research, Bergey admires the administration's goal of emphasizing teaching.

"The greatest role of the University of Oklahoma remains its teaching," Bergey says. "Universities such as MIT and Cal Tech, that have already established an 'identity,' can devote a significant part of their effort to meeting societal needs. OU, on the other hand, is looking for status. In the past, that search for status has focused on scientific research. But what Oklahoma needs most now is a cadre of educated students who will stay in the state and contribute their efforts to the good of the state. That's why I'm encouraged by President Boren's emphasis on teaching."

Bergey is emphatic in his advice to anyone considering retirement.

"Have something to do," he says flatly. "That was no problem for me. My company grew so fast I had to retire. I was 69, but age was not a factor; I had to get out and take care of my company."

To return to teaching, Bergey has delayed a long-standing goal—rebuilding an old aircraft.

"I bought a 1929 Curtiss Robin like the one Douglas Corrigan flew across the Atlantic to Ireland," Bergey says, "and I have barely had time to start on the restoration. But coming back to OU has been worth it."

Another retiree, chemist John Burr, changed fields completely when he returned to OU.

"After retiring in 1986 from the chemistry department, I took a journalism course with the idea of becoming an article writer and photogtapher but soon found that these are full-time jobs," Burr says. "However, as a volunteer in various groups in town, I found myself writing newsletters and other things, including columns for The Norman Transcript—coining a new term: not-for-profit journalist."

His volunteer activities brought Burr to the attention of Frances Johnson, director of the Writing Center, who persuaded him to join her as a consultant. The Writing Center offers free composition help in 45-minute sessions to anyone in the University community.

"We assist a diverse clientele," Burr says. "A young Vietnamese woman, lost in our culture, did not know where to begin an assignment. I discovered she came from an authoritarian family. She chose to write about that subject because she knew about it. In another instance, a nursing student faced an essay assignment on a medical treatment. She knew what she wanted to say, but she hadn't written an essay in eight years. I helped her write an outline, and she was on her way. Recently, a Fulbright candidate came in for help with his application. Having been a Fulbright scholar, I found it easy to help him."

Burr confronts his greatest challenge with international students, some of whom experience problems both in writing and speaking English.

"I tell them to read their work aloud to a friend," he says. "Often they'll hear their mistakes."

Burr applauds bringing OU retirees back into the classroom.
"I like the one-on-one aspect," he says. "I'm making a difference with students. The late Bob Montgomery (of OU's personnel services office) advised me to retire to something. I planned, and then I used my skills to do something I love. Sometimes I'm so busy I feel like I never retired. I do not look back; I look ahead. For example, I'm going to explore the Internet soon."

Mary Jo Ruggles, who retired from the School of Music in 1994, returned for the fall semester to teach Native American music.

"After open heart surgery a few years ago, I needed to reduce my schedule," she says. "But I missed teaching, especially mentoring the graduate students in world and American music. Furthermore, I had met undergraduates from many backgrounds, and they enriched me. I met Native American communities through the students, also."

Ruggles sees a change in today's students, who are more sensitive to other cultures, the environment and the world.

"In the '80s, the students seemed most concerned about themselves," she says. "They wanted to get their degree and get a job. They focused more inwardly. Since around 1990, however, I've noticed a swing in the other direction."

Ruggles believes the University has changed as well.

"On the Academic Programs Council, we've stressed courses that prepare students to compete in a world shrunk by technology," she says. "Students learn the consequences of decisions affecting the environment and other cultures."

Since her retirement, Ruggles has done more choral conducting with local churches, using skills gained during her doctoral work. She has volunteered in the community and has continued to meet and learn from Native Americans.

She is working on two books, one a textbook on Native American music and the other a study of the Southern Cheyenne sun dance in Oklahoma. The latter book has evolved from an academic work into a book for the Cheyenne people.

Ruggles believes her retirement years have made her a better teacher and that students benefit from the insights and knowledge she has gained.

"That's why I believe in this program," she says. "It's good for the faculty, the students and the University. I feel needed. Coming back has proved that I still have the skills to make a difference in students' lives. Retired faculty coming back will find the University in a healthier condition because of David Boren's leadership. He's actually doing something about getting experienced senior faculty in front of younger students."

Boren is enthusiastic about recalling the retired faculty. "The idea of bringing retired full professors back to campus to teach and mentor students plays an important role in our comprehensive plan to put students first and to create a real sense of community on the campus."

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Emeritus professor of sociology Marilyn Affleck, at left with graduate student Roy Barnett, enjoyed quilting, gardening and grandchildren, but after a couple of years on the academic sidelines, she was ready to get back into the game.
“In the fall semester alone, the program met with great success as 26 faculty members returned to teach a total of 44 courses, making an impact on about 400 students. In addition, many of these faculty assumed advising and mentoring duties, which are so important to the academic and personal growth of students.”

Helmut Fischbeck retired from physics and astronomy in 1993. Since then he has “been doing what I’ve always wanted to do—reading. The library offers an excellent collection of German books.”

But Fischbeck missed the contact with students. He returned to teach a required “Physics for Life Sciences” course to students from pharmacy, premed, zoology, physical therapy and other departments. However, he got more than he expected, literally—a class of 250 students in a large Dale Hall lecture room ill-suited to teaching physics. Some were not well prepared in mathematics and English. “That was a change from my earlier teaching experience,” he says.

The veteran teacher drew on his classroom savvy to solve the problem.

“I augmented lectures with videotaped demonstrations and a video series called ‘The Mechanical Universe,’” he explains. “Still, the room prevented the close contact I would have preferred. I had problems hearing their questions.”

The professor noted one pleasant change, however. “The new physics texts use color well, and they’re easier to read.”

Fischbeck and his wife never considered leaving Norman when he retired. “I love the place. I’ve got two acres of land and plenty to do, including travel. You always think when you retire, you will kick back and relax. It didn’t work.”

Marilyn Affleck, who retired from the sociology department in 1990, feels the same way.

“I’ve been quilting, doing yard work, taking care of grandchildren and pets,” she says. She returned to OU three years ago to teach “Classical Sociological Theory,” a graduate seminar.

“It was fun to get back and reread my notes and review the text. I like teaching and discussing theoretical issues, looking at the early sociologists,” Affleck says. “The students haven’t changed much, especially at the graduate level. I like teaching at the graduate level because the students are more advanced and comfortable with the concepts of sociology. I try to show the students how the ideas of the early sociologists are relevant to the 1990s. The students knew I’d retired, but they were glad to gain another classical theorist.”

Affleck likes the idea of bringing back retired faculty to teach.

“OU is getting cheap labor, yet the program rewards faculty by letting

A large class in a large lecture hall denied emeritus professor Helmut Fischbeck the close contact he prefers for his physics course, but the veteran teacher drew on his classroom experience to adapt to the situation.

OU Interim Provost Nancy Mergler sees many benefits in the plan to enlist the classroom services of retired faculty.

“This is a wonderful way to spend a relatively small amount of money and bring back skilled and caring faculty who want to be in the classroom or in a nontraditional context with students,” Mergler says. “The students gain a ‘longer view’ of the discipline. So we have a win-win situation.”
Mergler has talked with some retirees who, although too busy to return to teaching this year, hope to be able to do so in the future.

"This will be a changing pool of people who look forward to sharing their knowledge and interacting with the departmental faculty," she says. "The retirees make a contribution to the current faculty and advisors through their enthusiasm and fresh viewpoints."

The idea of a fresh viewpoint strikes a chord with Rex Ellington, who retired from chemical engineering and materials science in 1987. He returned to teach an honors colloquium on "Clean Fuels—Clean Technology" with Mark Meo, director of the Science and Public Policy Program and CEMS associate professor.

Ellington feels that 30 years of working in and consulting with many companies in industry before coming to OU in 1982 enabled him to gain knowledge directly relevant to the needs of today's students.

"Multinational and multidisciplinary—those requirements echo through business and industry today," Ellington says. "I must challenge students to read literature outside their discipline, talk about what they have learned and see the complicated problems facing business, industry and academia. These problems require a team approach. Since business and industry value interdisciplinary teams, we use a team approach for the colloquium. As a result, student teams have learned to tackle problems just like they will after graduation."

Ellington has found that some of the students have had to lose their fear of something that might appear "stupid."

"Effective teams have no 'boss,' so I have to break down the traditional teacher/student approach. I love to watch students breaking out of their shells, melding and learning to rely on each other's skills. Technical students begin to value policy people. Too often in the past, technical people have been presented problems where others have already made policy. What must happen now—and what we stress in the colloquium—is that technical people must work with policy-makers at the beginning of the process."

"When students break out of their shells, the teams develop synergy; as a team they are better than the sum of their individual skills," Ellington says. "And in a shrinking world, where environmental concerns cut across international boundaries, team skills prove crucial to solving problems. By being in the marketplace, I gained insights that make me a better teacher."

Ellington contends that universities do not have a good record for facing multidisciplinary problems.

"Universities have been handicapped by their organizational structure—colleges, departments and subdisciplines," he says. "We should develop a spirit of cooperation between 'fiefdoms' and then pool talent—or universities might become irrelevant to solving tomorrow's problems."

The emeritus professor believes two factors will help OU improve its future track record on interdisciplinary problem solving.

"First, today's high school students bring impressive technical skills to the table—skills I didn't obtain until my first two years of college," Ellington says.

"Second, President Boren sees the value of bringing back skilled retirees who have had a chance to take a new look at the world and can develop a fresh approach to new problems," he adds. "OU has not kept up with such universities as Stanford and MIT, schools that OU should be measuring itself against. These universities have allied themselves with powerful alumni, analyzed social changes and tackled tomorrow's problems. As a result, they've adapted better to meeting industry's needs. That's why I admire the emeritus professor approach to invigorating teaching."

David Boren proved Thomas Wolfe wrong when he came home again to the University of Oklahoma. What could be more natural than for him to bring back great teachers to their classroom homes as well?