

# SOONER SPOTLIGHT NANCY MERGLER

**N**ancy Mergler talks a lot about the role luck has played in her life. She even attributes to luck being noticed by President David L. Boren when the University was searching for a new provost in 1995. "I was definitely a dark horse candidate. Traditionally, it's the deans of large colleges within an institution who become provost," she says. "I think I came to President Boren's attention because I was lucky enough to know lots and lots of people."

Luck? Well, maybe. Or maybe it was because Mergler, who joined OU's psychology department faculty as an assistant professor in 1979, has served ably on countless University boards and committees over the years. She also revitalized the OU Honors Program, which achieved full college status in 1997, a year after she became senior vice president and provost, chosen over candidates from throughout the United States. Today, after nearly six years as the Norman campus' No. 2 administrator, she is still the only woman provost in the Big 12 Conference.

Boren credits Mergler with having a great impact on OU's academic programs. "I have had the opportunity to work with provosts at some of our nation's most prominent universities," he says. "She is as strong an advocate for the faculty as you will find. Dr. Mergler always helps assure the University puts our educational mission first."

Mergler and Boren are a good match. "He is an extremely effective spokesperson for OU's mission," she says. "My job is to maintain the well-woven fabric that is this institution."

The provost's job, she says, is primarily one of stewardship and leadership. "You must have a sense of purpose and mission and an overarching concern for the well-being and the future of the institution. And you need to believe that the insti-



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A strong advocate for the faculty, Nancy Mergler, here with Fine Arts Dean Marvin Lamb, believes in listening to concerns and establishing dialogue with all parties charged with OU's academic mission.

tion of higher learning provides a transforming experience." Most of all, however, Mergler believes the key to being a good administrator at any level is to listen to the concerns and views of people, establish dialogues, and be a good and honest communicator.

She is steward, leader, communicator and much more. In her role as provost, Mergler is the Norman campus' chief academic and administrative officer, with responsibility for intellectual standards; institutional planning and budgeting; and student and faculty recruitment, retention and development. She meets regularly with vice presidents, deans, Faculty Senate, program directors, and various provost advisory councils. She is actively involved in program development and review; academic policies and procedures; enrollment management; and personnel actions involving faculty, students, and academic support staff.

As an undergraduate at William Smith College in Geneva, New York, Mergler never dreamed she would someday become provost of a major

public university. She envisioned no clear career path when she began her own college education.

"I enjoyed math and statistics, but I knew I wanted to work in arenas in which I could interact with others," she says. She settled on an undergraduate degree in psychology, then continued on at Syracuse University, where she earned master's and doctoral degrees in developmental psychology.

Just before defending her doctoral dissertation, she landed her first teaching job at Washington College in Maryland. "It was a small school. There were only four psychology faculty, so I taught everything." She stayed three years while seeking a graduate-level teaching opportunity. Then came the offer from OU.

Raised and educated on the East Coast, Mergler viewed any place west of the Mississippi River as "the great unknown." But the members of OU's psychology department were nurturing and supportive. "They raised me," Mergler says, "and they continued to support me as I acquired a husband, a dog and two kids."

Her two sons, Cyrus, a freshman at the University of Iowa, and Benjamin, a junior at Norman High School, were 5 and 3 respectively in 1987 when Mergler shifted to a career in administration as director of the Honors Program.

"It was an exciting job," she says. "I was involved with scholarships, advising, and curriculum. I got to know deans, faculty, and students. It gave me a sense of the things that were important to the institution, such as helping students develop leadership skills and breaking down the barriers between faculty and students."

Under her guidance, the Honors Program expanded its curriculum and advising services, established a student Honors Council, and created the



Provost Nancy Mergler, a psychologist, meets her English professor husband, Ron Schleifer, at the commemorative bench south of Evans Hall given by their two sons in honor of their paternal grandparents. Mergler and Schleifer have coauthored a book with OU professor Robert Con Davis.

Undergraduate Research Program, which provides funds for students to conduct research under faculty supervision. Each year during Mom's Weekend, the students showcase their projects through formal presentations.

"Undergraduates have few opportunities to show off to their families what they're learning. This program gives them that chance," Mergler says.

Despite her hectic schedule, Mergler still makes time to teach one honors course a year. "I do it for relief," she says with a laugh. "I have fun, and I meet bright students. And it reminds me about the rhythms of the semester. I notice when students get tired and stressed, and I remember that educating oneself is a tiring endeavor."

Enlisting others to return to teach at OU is another of Mergler's favorite projects. The Retired Faculty Program, which provides additional course sections each year taught by emeritus professors, was established while she was interim provost.

"It was President Boren's idea—I wish I could take credit for it—but I had fun implementing it," she says. "These professors love the institution. They spent their careers here. They participate in the program be-

cause they love it. Some teach one class a semester. Others teach for a while, stop and come back. It's wonderful seeing these teachers back on campus interacting with the students."

These days, Mergler devotes a good deal of time to the issue of technology's place in higher education. The question is, she says, "In what circumstances is technology a good tool for teaching?" Her goal is to give the faculty time to explore the possibilities.

"Faculty are always interested in implementing better ways of teaching and learning. As a whole, they're not resistant to technology-based education. But some disciplines, such as philosophy or studio art, don't lend themselves to it as easily as others," she explains. "On the other hand, technology is absolutely essential for research in some domains. Genome research and DNA analysis would be impossible without computers."

Mergler does not buy into the widely held view that information technology will completely change education. "Teachers need to determine what they want to make happen and, through experimentation with technology, find the tools that work," she says.

Dennis Aebersold, who joined the University last year as OU's chief information officer and vice president for Information Technology Development, works closely with Mergler on technology issues. "Provost Mergler not only welcomed me to the OU community, but she has also served as mentor and advisor on many issues," he says. "She's a great listener and cares tremendously about OU. She goes to extra lengths to keep the deans and vice presidents informed about important issues on campus."

When not attending to University business, Mergler spends as much time as possible with her husband, OU English professor Ronald Schleifer, and their sons. While admitting that over the years she has not always been able to devote as much time and energy to her family as she would have liked, she believes she has been able to strike a balance in her life because of them.

"I have a wonderful husband and two great kids," she says. "I was lucky that my kids have always been healthy. I guess they thrived on my benign neglect."

Her favorite solitary leisure activity is gardening. "I'm a passionate gardener," she says. "I find it therapeutic. If I weed a bed, I can finish it. I have a sense of completion, of closure. In my job, I often patch a hole here, and another leak springs somewhere else."

So what does the future hold for Nancy Mergler? She says she will continue to help the University of Oklahoma grow and help President Boren as much as she can.

"I was very lucky to have met many, many people along the way who have helped me," she insists. "Not everyone is that lucky. What OU offers to people—students, faculty, alumni, Oklahomans—is tremendous, and I count myself as one who has benefited and grown because of our University. You know how President Boren is always talking about possibilities here? I want to make as many possibilities as I can so others can have their own good luck." 🍷

—DEBRA LEVY