



prologue.

When a provost retires, sometimes the first question might be “What’s a provost?”

Her colleagues gave Norman campus provost Nancy Mergler a pretty impressive retirement party. The Union’s Beaird Lounge was packed; the tributes were effusive; and by the time the honoree had thanked everyone who does or did report to her or who had mentored her over her successful 19-year tenure, there was little left to be said.

Except—19 years? Nineteen years in a job that for much of its OU life, with one notable exception, had been a revolving door for academic administrators on their way to somewhere else, whether by their own choice or by consensus? It takes a special person to occupy this office, which is part academician, part diplomat, part peacekeeper, part one tough cookie.

Internally, the office of the provost—who in the case of Mergler and several others also carries the title senior vice president—has responsibilities second only to the President’s. Instruction; research and creative activity; continuing education and public service; intellectual standards; institutional planning and budgeting; recruitment, retention and development of faculty and students; program development and review; enrollment management; academic policies and procedures; and personnel actions involving faculty, students and academic support. Deans report to the provost, as do certain other vice presidents and a long list of directors.

Externally, however, the provost labors somewhat in anonymity. Students, whose academic lives ultimately were governed by the provost, become alumni who seldom even hear the word. They are contacted by the President, their deans or directors, alumni officers, fund-

raisers—but never by the provost. If they ever knew what the provost does, they soon forget.

The history of the provost’s office at the University of Oklahoma isn’t all that long. For most of the institution’s nearly 125 years, it has had to make do with a vice president or two or three to oversee both its academic and administrative operations. That changed with the coming of the controversial J. Herbert Hollomon to the presidency in 1968.

Hollomon’s predecessor, George L. Cross, had five vice presidents at the time of his retirement—four on the Norman campus and one at the Health Sciences Center; Hollomon retained them and added four more. Cross’ executive vice president, Pete Kyle McCarter, became vice president for academic affairs, initially on a par with his eight brethren, but Hollomon quickly realized he needed more leadership among his sometimes fractious veeps. McCarter became OU’s first provost, his 3 1/2 years outlasting Hollomon and into the Paul F. Sharp administration.

I. Moyer Hunsberger lasted only two years as Norman campus provost, during which time, 1973, the provost system was installed at the OU Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City. In his first appearance as interim provost, OU veteran administrator J.R. Morris served for two years, preceding the first woman provost, Barbara S. Uehling, who then left after the magic two.

Morris returned as interim provost in 1978 for a year until President William S. Banowsky made his appointment permanent, putting a stopper in the office’s swinging door by banking on Morris’ long commitment to OU. The solution held until Morris retired in 1986, his ser-

vice as provost totaling 10 years with a couple of times-out as interim president when the University was between chief executives.

Nebraska native Joan Wadlow was Norman provost for the next five years; OU music school director Richard Gipson was interim for a year; followed by dean of geosciences James Kimpel, who was provost for 2 1/2 years.

When he became president in 1995, David Boren found Nancy Mergler directing a revitalized Honors Program (now Honors College), an academic endeavor close to his heart. She was admittedly the dark horse candidate, tradition favoring more senior administrators, but Boren knew what he wanted, and history has proven his choice was the correct one. They have been a perfect match—Boren the spellbinder, out front driving the University forward with an idea a minute, Mergler quietly weaving those ideas into programs, keeping the moving parts in sync.

It came as no surprise when Mergler announced that she will close the circle by returning to teach in the Honors College, while senior vice provost Kyle Harper steps in as interim. Classics and letters professor Harper has been heavily involved in the Janux online teaching initiative and is the creator of the Institute for the American Constitution Heritage, the wildly successful Teach-Ins on Constitutionalism and *Freedom.ou.edu*. As the search for a new provost proceeds, Harper should be a strong candidate.

Occasionally it takes a while to make a system work, but Nancy Mergler has proven that with the right person in the right job, it can last a long time.

—CJB