

MAR05-2004-002500

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the MAR05 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

A Physicist as President of the University

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My wife, physicist Frances Hellman, is fond of referring to me as a “restless soul,” and I do not dispute her. In the 40 years since graduating from the University of Western Ontario with a bachelor’s degree in mathematics and physics, I went on to earn master’s and doctorate degrees in physics and an honorary doctor of science degree from McMaster University. In 22 years working at AT&T Bell Laboratories, I held five positions, was department head in two departments, and director of one laboratory. At the University of California, San Diego, I was a Professor of Physics, chair of the Department of Physics, senior vice chancellor and then chancellor. Currently, in addition to being a professor of Physics, I am president of the University of California. The “restless” trajectory of my career from physics undergraduate to university president follows the nature of physics itself. In physics, you are constantly seeking challenges, experimenting, creating hypotheses, looking for and finding solutions. I recall having a structured view of the world as a boy, a sense that there was a guiding “master plan” to most things and that wise, educated, benevolent people were there to implement the plan. “They” would do the right thing. Along the way, I realized, “there is no ‘they’ there; there is only us.” Acknowledging the laws of thermodynamics—“you can’t win, you can’t break even, and you can’t get out of the game” —I nonetheless believe that if you have a restless mind, an open heart, and intellectual honesty without giving into wishful thinking, physicists can do anything. .