Purdue CLA is not alone in looking more closely at emeriti relations, the subject of my Dean’s Fellow project. As Seth Matthew Fishman writes in “The Merits of Emeriti” (Academe, 2012): “The silver tide of faculty retirement continues to ebb and flow. While much of today’s scholarship on faculty retirement focuses on the financial implications for colleges and universities, arguing that older faculty members clog up the faculty pipeline, cost more in salary and benefits, and are ineffective teachers who fear technology, little research addresses the retired faculty member’s experience.” Taking Fishman’s lead, I address how retired CLA faculty feel about the benefits currently available to them as well as benefits that they wish to see put in place. Just as importantly, I asked retired faculty about the more subjective dimensions and interpersonal aspects of the emeriti experience. Do they still feel welcomed in the college? Do they feel appreciated? To find out, I took a two-pronged approach, combining the following quantitative and qualitative elements:

Qualtrics Survey: Quantitative. With the assistance of Johnathan Dobben, a PHD student in political science at Purdue, and CLA Dean’s Office Staff member Holly-Tittle-Hudson, I designed, distributed, and analyzed data from a Qualtrics survey sent to all known CLA emeriti in the spring/summer of 2017. We received nineteen completed responses. Respondents worked at Purdue from 1962 to 2017 and, on average, spent 34 years in service at Purdue.

Interviews: Qualitative. I conducted nine interviews in the spring of 2017. Eight were with retired faculty. I also interviewed a late emeriti’s female spouse. Not a tenure-track faculty member, the spouse taught liberal arts at Purdue during her own long career.

What the Qualtrics survey and the interviews tells us: There is good news to share. Sixteen of the nineteen survey respondents feel they have a good sense of what Purdue facilities and benefits are available
to them as emeriti (Qualtrics question 12). Emeriti are pleased with their university-level benefits. Perhaps not surprisingly, campus parking and library privileges are, by wide margins, the two benefits respondents regard as especially important to them. Emeriti are familiar with PURA, the university retiree association. PURA presents speakers and other programming relevant to emeriti at monthly gatherings, often held at the MCI Cafeteria.¹

CLA departments have done a reasonably good job of keeping up with emeriti, but there are ways to tweak communications that emeriti tell us they would appreciate. These tweaks would not be expensive for the college to put in place, but they would help emeriti feel more a part of the college, rather than apart from it. Overwhelmingly, respondents want to remain informed about events, news, and doings in their home department and the college in general. Only one of the nineteen respondents is uninterested in getting this information (Question 4). All nineteen consider email the best way to receive information (Question 5). Responses vary about what kind of information retired faculty want to know about. Departmental and university events, new hiring, funerals, promotions, and student and faculty awards, however, draw the greatest numbers of survey responses (Question 6). The take away: emeriti remain interested in keeping abreast of a wide range of college and department doings, student news, and faculty endeavors. They want to receive communications via electronic mail. Emeriti, however, do not only want to receive information via electronic mail. They also want to remain visible on their department’s website directory (Question 7).

Before reviewing the survey data, I had not anticipated that emeriti want more than their email addresses to remain on departmental directories. Most request a deeper and richer web presence. Eleven of the nineteen, for example, want their current c.v. posted online; ten want a link to their home page; nine would like a picture of themselves connected to their email information, and eight would like departmental home pages to include information about their research interests (Question 7). The robust interest emeriti express in receiving CLA information as well as their wish to maintain a departmental web presence may put in context emeriti responses to another survey question. Less than half (9 of 19) of respondents feel that they remain “a

¹The PURA website (http://www.purdue.edu/retirees, “contains information ranging from health-related news to details of potential benefits available to employees who have retired from Purdue. It also contains links to other Web sites, including the TIAA-CREF site on retirement funds, the Greater Lafayette Volunteer Bureau, Purdue Convocations and Intercollegiate Athletics” (Purdue News service article, “Purdue retirees benefit from new Web site.”)
part of their department and the college” (Question 15). When asked how the department and college could help emeriti feel more connected, responses vary, but generally center on receiving more information via emails, newsletters, and access to calendars of departmental/college events. I recommend CLA help emeriti feel they remain a part of the college and their home department by including the category of “emeriti relations” in the job description of one Dean’s Office-level support staff member. Each department should dedicate a small amount of time (perhaps one hour per week) for one staff member (or student assistant) to handle communications with retired faculty. All departments should make sure their “webmaster” understands that emeriti need to be fully included on the official department web page.

Is the question about feeling “a part” of CLA too vague to interpret? What do we mean when we ask emeriti if they feel “a part”? After reviewing the survey, and conducting interviews with emeriti last spring, I can say that emeriti do not interpret feeling “a part” as meaning they want to assume the responsibilities one expects an active faculty member to perform. Emeriti enjoy the freedom and flexibility their status affords them. Because emeriti understand that departmental funds and administrative services are limited, they do not interpret feeling “a part” as meaning they want to draw financial and administrative resources away from current faculty and students. When emeriti say they no longer feel “a part” of CLA, they are reflecting their sense that, upon retirement, they no longer believe the college and their department treats them as significant members of the extended CLA community. Upon retirement, many emeriti told me, they feel invisible. Some do not mind going unnoticed, but many do. The uneasiness centers on a sharp reduction in what social theorists refer to as “symbolic” capital.

As one retired faculty reminded me, and as the Purdue faculty and staff handbook confirms, emeritus remains a status the Purdue trustees must confer upon retired faculty. ² “Technically, you are still a member

² Here is the information on “Professors Emeriti” from the Purdue Faculty and Staff Handbook:

“The emeritus title honors those who have made significant contributions to Purdue University through teaching, research or engagement. The University confers emeritus rank on faculty members holding professorial rank at the time of their retirement. Retirees generally must have had 10 years of continuous, full-time service at the University immediately preceding their retirement to qualify for emeritus rank. Persons appointed to emeritus rank are listed with the faculty in the bulletin of the college or school; given use of the University Libraries facilities and faculty privileges in purchasing athletic, convocations and other tickets; invited to academic and University functions in the areas of their interests; and, at the discretion of
of Purdue,” she told me. Given the official, if honorific, nature of emeriti status, many I interviewed express disappointment that CLA has shortchanged their symbolic capital. Less than half of Qualtrics respondents (9 of 19) say CLA and their home department have properly acknowledged their former and/or current contributions (Question 13). As one emeriti told me, “the atmosphere has not been inviting.” When she visits the main office of her home department, she does not feel welcomed. “I want to get out of there quickly,” she added. The spouse of a deceased faculty member told me: “Once my husband left the department, it was as if he fell off a cliff.” We need to help emeriti feel more a part of the college, rather than apart from the college. My recommendation is that college and department leadership make sure current faculty and staff understand that emeriti remain official members of the Purdue community and they should be treated as such.

The survey indicates that the college needs to do a better job handling faculty transition from full-time faculty to emeriti status. Less than half (8 of 19) of survey respondents regard their transition from faculty to emeriti status as handled well by their home department and the college (Question 8). Five of the nineteen feel their department and the college handled the transition badly. My interviews, similarly, suggest emeriti experienced mixed feelings about their transition. Some emeriti are very pleased with their treatment. One told me how happy he was to receive a laptop computer as a retirement gift from his home department. He interpreted the gift as a message. His colleagues understood his desire to communicate after retirement. (I should add here that the emeriti held a leadership position in his department. He has remained involved in the life of his department as a mentor to faculty and graduate students while keeping up a robust scholarly profile in his discipline. My general observation is that emeriti who held leadership positions when they were full-time faculty, perhaps not surprisingly, continue to experience a closer relation to Purdue than do peers who focused on teaching and discovery.) Departments offered some emeriti retirement parties. Some emeriti did not receive the same offer. One emeriti I interviewed said that transition policies should be “regularized.” “Some things need to be universal,” he added. Another emeritus says the key moment to assert
lasting connections with emeriti needs to occur during the transition period. “The Dean will have better success [in improving relations with emeriti] if he connects immediately with those about to retire.” I recommend the Dean consult with Department Heads about setting a uniform policy on best practices for department-sponsored gift giving and celebrations for retiring faculty.

So, to take a turn on Freud, what do emeriti want? Before answering that question, let me suggest what emeriti do not want. One emeriti told me that emeriti tend be “self-conscious. They don’t want to be seen as meddling or begging for attention.” At the same time, emeriti chafe at what they perceive as a tone deafness among Purdue development officers. One emeriti related an anecdote he heard from another emeriti who received a form letter: “Dear Professor: Thank you for your donation. If you are ever in West Lafayette, please stop by.” The emeriti who received this letter was (and remains) a long time West Lafayette resident. “It was stupidity,” said the emeriti who told me this story. “It was so offensive. The message was you don’t feel welcome.” Emeriti faculty do want to volunteer their services to CLA (see Question 10). One emeriti encouraged the Dean to add an emeriti faculty member to the Dean’s Advisory Council. The same emeriti expressed interest in becoming a mentor in the Dean’s Scholars Program. Emeriti want to participate in an “Emeriti seminar.” One emeriti continues to give pre-performance talks in his area for Convocations and Purdue theater. In interviews, however, two faculty members spoke of barriers to volunteering at Purdue. One emeriti met with the Dean of the Graduate School to become an “ombudsperson for international students.” The Graduate School Dean denied his request. Helping international students “learn academic norms overlaps with functions of [DGS] staff.” Another emeritus says there should be a “mechanism to invite emeriti to make a continuing contribution. Let [emeriti] announce their interests.” “It is very hard to volunteer for anything here at Purdue,” another told me. This emeriti encourages Purdue to develop some kind of “clearinghouse” to help match emeriti volunteer interests with department, college, and university needs. (Many already volunteer in the larger Lafayette community. Some are active in local historical societies. Others contribute their time and expertise in church, legal, educational -- such as LARA and WALLA --, and governmental assistance programs.) Emeriti want to help the college, but they do not want to feel the college is taking advantage of their service. For example, one emeriti told me she wants to volunteer to teach an undergraduate class to relieve part of an untenured professor’s teaching obligation. The goal, according to
the emeriti, would be to help the untenured faculty member complete a research project necessary to secure tenure and promotion. At the same time, the emeriti told me, she is concerned administrators will misinterpret her offer as a reason not to hire new faculty. I recommend the Dean’s office develop and implement a “clearinghouse” or “mechanism” to enable emeriti to list their interests in volunteerism and to reduce any barriers or red tape that emeriti report has stymied their wish to share their talents and energies.

Emeriti do not want to step on toes or to drain precious resources, but many are uncomfortable when they visit their department to pick up mail and to say hello. An “emeriti commons” – including a coffee maker, a computer or two, bookshelves, a locker, a printer, stationary, and office supplies -- would help retired faculty get into what one emeriti calls the “habit of visiting” (see Question 9b. and Question 11). Another interviewee agrees. One CLA office area designated for emeriti would provide “some place to interact” with other emeriti. A third states that along with alleviation of what he calls the “disappearance from lists,” the “most important thing is having space. Space becomes a very personal issue,” he told me. Emeriti want continued visibility in official departmental digital culture and invitations, where appropriate, to on site college and departmental events. “Being asked [to attend events] is the important thing. You have to make people feel – not essential or needed, but engaged. It feels good to know someone cares about your opinion.” One emeriti suggested the college “do something every year to honor the retirees” such as a “lunch reception.” The emeriti said that leadership on emeriti relations must begin at the level of the college’s administration. “The Dean must make it known he wants to have communications with us [the emeriti]. Contact can’t be only to ask for [financial] contributions to the college.” Another emeriti said the “department should take the lead [in addressing emeriti issues]. They are the closest. I refuse to have us erased from the [department web page] directory. Even if you don’t live in town it is good to keep informed. It is shocking the department does not care to put you on the mailing list,” she said. I recommend CLA create an “Emeriti Commons.”

I learned something else from talking to emeriti. The subject may go beyond the scope of my Dean Fellowship project, but it is worthwhile to mention here because the theme connects with emeriti concerns. Some emeriti think their current sense of apartness from the college reflects a more general diminishment of
camaraderie in the college. One emeriti told me he saw signs of a frayed community before retiring from CLA after a long (over forty year) and fruitful career as a popular teacher, respected mentor, and scholar. His premise is that, “the problem starts when people know you are half time. You are doing less committee work. Younger faculty no longer look at you as a judge of their tenure. Add to that the natural problems of age; you are in your sixties; they are in their thirties.” Because most other faculty in his department had “never seen me teach,” or offered support “when you bring people here” to give a public lecture, he lamented the insecure foundation for building relationships once he assumed emeriti status. For this faculty member, administrators – Deans and Department Heads – need, in his terms, “to use [their] moral stature to effect collegial behavior.” While faculty are still in rank, he believes, college leaders should expect faculty to “attend ¾ of the public events” sponsored by one’s home department. The emeriti’s stories of troubled faculty relations moved me. He was a popular and respected professor in his department, and yet he endured a lack of reciprocation when he reached out to other faculty. He called colleagues for lunch, but they rarely invited him. He donated 200 books to a junior colleague in his field, but never received a thank you note. Another interviewee suggested that his sense of being “ignored” as an emeriti had roots in changes in faculty relations before he retired. “It goes back to the time when [my department] switched from group offices to separate offices,” he said. “People became more focused on themselves.” Other interviewees touched on the theme of liberal arts faculty becoming more (perhaps overly) professionalized. One emeriti believes faculty focus on cultivating their vitas has replaced an interest in engaging with other faculty and attending departmental events in the afternoon. I recommend the Dean, in consultation with Department Heads, assume leadership roles to increase current faculty attendance at department-sponsored events and, in general, promote good will among current faculty.

Stewards of cultural memory, the College of Liberal Arts needs to make sure retired faculty know we remember their contributions. Emeriti need to feel welcome to attend events and functions. The issue of cultural memory, and the accompanying sense that the college needs to remember their own, was put forward by one emeriti: “I recognize my department has no memory; that’s the way it is. A museum must
have a memory to take care of their collection. We have no institutional memory.” My recommendation is that the college works to align emeriti relations with Purdue’s hallmark emphases on loyalty and tradition.

Highlights of my findings:

1. Emeriti believe college and departmental administrators need to play a leadership role in establishing the importance of maintaining good relations with emeriti.

2. Emeriti remain interested in the college and their home departments. They want to be helpful, especially to students, but are concerned about overstepping their place as retired faculty.

3. Emeriti want to maintain the “symbolic capital” their official affiliation with Purdue affords to them.

4. Emeriti do not want to draw scarce resources away from current students and faculty.

5. Emeriti experience barriers towards volunteering. They ask for a “clearinghouse” to facilitate their contributions to the college.

6. Emeriti are very comfortable receiving information via electronic mail. They want their professional information posted on official department websites.

7. Emeriti are attracted to the idea of an “emeriti commons.” They would appreciate a shared space on campus where they could meet with each other, work, keep their things in a safe place, have a coffee, print a paper.

8. The transition period from active faculty to emeriti status is a crucial point in the life of the retired faculty member. It is a moment that CLA needs to handle with care.

9. Emeriti are familiar with existing university programs relevant to them. They appreciate the university-level programs and the support the university already provides for them. PURA, Purdue’s university-wide retirement association, is well known to emeriti.

10. The college and departments should assign a staff member, administrator, or graduate student to handle communications with emeriti. Emeriti want to receive newsletters and mailings related to CLA and department events. Emeriti are offended when they only hear from development officers.
11. Emeriti who held administration positions in the college and their home department tend to remain more engaged with Purdue events than those who were regular faculty. Special attention should be paid to faculty who never rose to the rank of full professor as well as to those who never took part in administration. These faculty express the greatest degree of upset at feeling uninformed, uninvited, and not consulted about department and college events.

12. Some emeriti perceive their sense of feeling “apart” from the college and their home department may reflect the lack of camaraderie they experienced prior to their retirement.