When Emeriti Can Speak for Retired Colleagues: Defining the Problem

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What is the problem?

At some universities, professors lose their university email accounts when they retire from employment—even when they remain professionally and academically active. This practice, familiar at a number of European universities, is also found at universities in the United States and Canada. Its consequences deserve increasing attention because a university email account is no longer merely a convenient communication service. It is part of a professor's long-established *academic identity, professional network, institutional connection, and access to the digital academic environment.*

The problem has become even more significant with the rapid development of *artificial intelligence and digitally supported academic collaboration.* Professionally active retired professors increasingly need a stable digital identity to communicate with colleagues, participate in research and professional networks, use digital and AI-supported services, contribute to university activities, mentor younger colleagues, and remain visible within the international academic community.

An important distinction: professors emeriti and other retired professors

The consequences are not experienced equally. *Professors emeriti frequently retain their university email accounts and other institutional privileges after retirement***.** They therefore may never personally experience the disruption caused by the termination of a long-standing university email account.

Other retired professors may find themselves in a very different position. They may remain academically and professionally active for many years after retirement but, because they have not received the emeritus title, lose their university email address simply because their employment relationship has ended.

This creates an important question of academic fairness:
Should continued access to a basic instrument of academic communication depend primarily on an honorary title, or should professionally and academically active retired professors also have a reasonable opportunity to retain their established university email accounts?

A problem of voice

There is an additional difficulty.

Retired professors who have lost their university email accounts may have less institutional influence precisely when they need it most. Some may hesitate to challenge a decision made by university administration. Others may not belong to an association capable of representing their interests.

Professors emeriti, however, are often in a much stronger position. They retain institutional recognition, professional standing, academic networks, and frequently their university email accounts. They can therefore raise a question that affected retired colleagues may find difficult to raise themselves.

This leads to a potentially important role for professors emeriti:
Professors emeriti can become advocates for retired colleagues who remain professionally and academically active but do not hold the emeritus title.

The question for professors emeriti

The issue can therefore be formulated as an action-oriented question:
How can professors emeriti be encouraged to use their academic standing and institutional voice to advocate for professionally and academically active retired colleagues who have lost—or are at risk of losing—their university email accounts?

They could ask university leadership to examine existing policies, identify their consequences, compare them with practices at other universities, consult affected retired professors, and consider policies that allow professionally active retirees to maintain appropriate university email access.

The objective should not be confrontation. It should be *constructive institutional problem-solving*.
Professors emeriti can say, in effect:**"***This problem may not affect us because we retain our university email accounts. But it affects our retired colleagues. We therefore have a responsibility to help make their voices heard."*

From privilege to solidarity

The emeritus title recognizes past academic contribution. It can also provide an opportunity for continued service to the academic community.

One expression of that service is *solidarity with colleagues whose formal employment has ended but whose academic contribution has not.*

The question therefore reaches beyond email:
What responsibilities do those who retain institutional privileges have toward academically active colleagues who lose them at retirement?

University account provides a concrete case in which professors emeriti can demonstrate that retirement need not mean exclusion from the digital academic

community. In the age of artificial intelligence, this question is becoming more—not less—important.

A call to action

We invite professors emeriti and their associations to ask:
Does our university terminate the email accounts of professionally and academically active retired professors who do not hold the emeritus title?

If the answer is yes, the next question should be:
What can we, as professors emeriti, do to help change this policy?

A first step can be simple: *listen to affected retired colleagues, document the consequences, and bring their case—on their behalf and together with them—to university leadership.*

Those who retain their academic voice can help ensure that those who retire do not unnecessarily lose theirs.

The concept here is **"***From privilege to solidarity."* It changes the argument from *"emeriti have something that other retirees do not"* into the much more constructive proposition: **"***emeriti are in a position to help colleagues whose voices have become institutionally weaker."*