E. Burton Swanson

Remarks on receiving the LEO award

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Thank you, Jane. And thanks too to the award committee and those who nominated me for the LEO award. As it recognizes career achievement, it set me to reflecting on how I embarked on something such as a career. As I did, I recognized my good fortune early on and my particular indebtedness to several individuals. So let me tell you about this good fortune.

I had arrived at UC Berkeley in the fall of 1967 to pursue my doctorate, knowing that I wanted to specialize in the emergent field of management information systems. The business school at that time did not recognized MIS as such, but it did offer a few entering students the opportunity to tailor what it termed an “information science” program to their own interests. It was a window of opportunity which worked for me. Because I was also interested in systems theory, I quickly found my way to Professor West Churchman, who became my advisor, mentor, and later, friend. It was a wonderful time to be at Berkeley, as West was finishing up his masterwork, *The Design of Inquiring Systems*, and had around him a group of students and faculty who were engaged in a wide variety of projects and who shared their work with each other by means of West’s weekly philosophy of science seminar.

While I thus studied under West’s direction, I had many opportunities to discuss my research interests with others at Berkeley. I recall one conversation with an economics professor. Hearing me profess my interest in “MIS”, he responded, “Oh, that’s just a buzzword.” While I was taken aback at the time, I realize now that he was right about the buzzword, but wrong about the import. I’m much more comfortable now being associated with buzzwords, as those of you familiar with my recent research know.

I completed my dissertation in 1971 and seeking adventure took a position as Visiting Scientist at a German institute, the Studiengruppe fuer Systemforschung. I was recruited to this position by Professor Horst Rittel of Berkeley’s Architecture and Urban Planning Department, who commuted regularly between Berkeley, Heidelberg, and Stuttgart, where he was occupied with a variety of applied research projects. Widely known for his work on “wicked problems,” Horst led one project to develop what was termed an “issue-based information system” (IBIS) in support of environmental planning for the Bundesrepublik, and I was pleased to be involved in this. In retrospect, this IBIS was a system way ahead of its time. Based in hypertext, it was in effect a Web on a single minicomputer. We used batch processing. No point and click. I had lots of time between computer runs to take long walks along the Neckar river.

I learned a lot during my stay in Germany, but in my second year I began to weigh a return to the States. Unfortunately, I had neglected to consider how hard to might be to participate in the academic job market from abroad. Happily, Richard Mason at UCLA, whom I had met in my first year at Berkeley, came to my rescue, sort of. Dick was preparing to take a leave at the NSF and was looking to find his own temporary replacement. He sent me a letter asking if I might be interested. But, he surface mailed it. Receiving it some five weeks later, I was afraid that the opportunity had by now passed me by. But I immediately wired Dick, saying simply “Yes!” as I recall, and in due course in the summer of 1974 I was off to UCLA and a second visiting position.

I arrived at UCLA knowing no one there and within a few days was ushered in to meet the chair of the Computers and Information Systems group, one Ephraim R. McLean. I had expected a quick debriefing from a very busy chair. Some three hours later, I staggered from Eph’s office, having been happily regaled by one of our field’s master raconteurs. I was on my way at UCLA. And I had Eph clearing space for me, as he has done for so many of us. Somehow, I managed to stay on, even with Dick Mason’s return.

And so my career at UCLA was launched, progressed, and continues to this day. Apart from my indebtedness to the four luminaries mentioned, I’m very grateful for the opportunity to have worked with many of you elsewhere over the years. I would like to acknowledge too the many UCLA doctoral students that I’ve been privileged to advise as they prepared for their own careers in what is now an established field. Certainly, they have been one of my principal career rewards. Finally, thank you to my wife, Cheryl, without whom my career journey would have been nowhere near so much fun.

Thank you again.