

ERNEST MORT 1931-2020

# Priest helped form UCSD's colleges system



BY GARY ROBBINS

LA JOLLA

Ernest Mort, a Catholic priest who helped UC San Diego develop its large system of undergraduate residential colleges and served as an inspiration on campus, has died. He was 88.

He died Jan. 19 of undisclosed causes in La Jolla, near UCSD, where Mort worked for nearly 30 years, primarily as dean of Revelle College.

The Nebraska native arrived at UCSD in September 1966, barely two years after the school began enrolling students as part of an enormous expansion of the University of California system.

He showed up in La Jolla on a foggy night and could hardly believe his eyes the next day when he discovered a campus that had only 1,200 students. It was a tiny fraction of the size of Ohio State University, where Mort, a [Paulist Father](#), had worked at the Newman Center, a Roman Catholic ministry.

Mort performed a similar role during his first three years at UCSD, taking charge during a

historic moment in the university's history. The campus basically absorbed and grew out of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography with the goal of becoming a major research school.

UCSD was mainly founded by Scripps oceanographer Roger Revelle, who initially recruited research-oriented graduate students then made way for undergraduates. That is the opposite of how public universities are typically created.

Revelle also decided that UCSD should develop a group of undergraduate residential colleges that would cultivate a sense of place and identity among students. He was building on the positive experience he had as an undergraduate at Pomona College, which is part of the Claremont Colleges, five small schools in Los Angeles County.

The first of UCSD's residential colleges was created in 1964 and was given the name Revelle a year later. Mort was appointed dean of Revelle in 1969, a position he held until 1993. He helped make Revelle a model for the six residential colleges that followed.

He also became widely known for cultivating leadership skills in students and for nurturing better town-and-gown relations between the campus and La Jolla.

Mort was an inspirational figure, says Ira Rubenstein, a 1987 UCSD graduate who said in an alumni tribute: "Ernie encouraged us to be involved. Ernie encouraged us to try new things. Develop new programs and new traditions. Do anything that hasn't been done before.

"It was through involvement outside of the classroom that I and many others learned lifelong skills: How to run a meeting. How to work with your peers. How to think on your feet. How to plan, budget and execute a project.

"I know I learned more from Ernie than any class or professor at UCSD."

Mort remained involved with UCSD after his retirement, especially in promoting scholarship programs. He was awestruck by how UCSD has grown and matured, telling an interviewer, "It has been an extraordinary, exciting thing to have known alumni students who are now grandparents, for heaven's sake, and have sent students to this campus."

UCSD is planning a memorial service. A date has yet to be set.

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