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From the Los Angeles Times

Yes, Virginia, he's coming to lead UCLA

Gene Block is leaving horse country for freeway central. 'It's time,' the biological clock researcher says.

By Larry Gordon
Times Staff Writer

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CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA. — Both the University of Virginia and its provost, Gene D. Block, exude stability.

The 182-year-old campus founded and designed by Thomas Jefferson is a glory of Early Americana in brick, white columns and flowering dogwoods. Administrators sometimes speak of "Mr. Jefferson" as if he might inspect the library tomorrow, and the restored 1820s dorm room of Edgar Allan Poe is on display.

The school has been Block's only employer since he took his first job here as an assistant professor of biology 29 years ago. He has been married to the same woman, Carol, for 37 years, and for decades he has researched the same general topic: biological clocks.

But now, the alarm clock is ringing for change in Block's life. At 58, he is moving across three time zones for a new, very big job. On Aug. 1 he is scheduled to become chancellor of UCLA, which is about a century younger and has about twice as many students as the University of Virginia's 19,000.

"It's time. It's time to move," said Block, a white-haired man who, despite his time in the South, retains a slight New York accent from his childhood as the son of a dairy products distributor in the Catskills region.

Block has been second-in-command for six years at Virginia, where he pushed for improving sciences on a campus known for humanities and worked for greater ethnic and gender diversity among the faculty and students. He always thought that if he left Charlottesville, he would head a smaller institution, "a fixer-upper."

But at UCLA, a plan collapsed last year to hire a Syracuse University administrator to succeed Chancellor Albert Carnesale, the highly successful fundraiser who led the school in a low-key manner for nine years. Then the university began to court Block. The school's strong emphasis on science and engineering appealed to him, as did its Asian ties and Pacific Rim location in a city with about 100 times Charlottesville's 41,000 population.

"UCLA is a very successful, mature university. But you don't want to just maintain it; you want to make it better," he said during an interview in Charlottesville.

Although he has visited Westwood frequently since his appointment in December, he said it was too soon to plan specifics. But he spoke of wanting to better connect the campus with the city, create more small classes for undergraduates, help young faculty members afford housing and improve diversity without violating the state's ban on affirmative action.

He also knows that a big part of his job will be raising funds, such as the recent \$100-million gift he helped land for a new school of leadership and public policy at Virginia.

UCLA deans want their divisions "to move ahead and attract the best faculty and students," he said. One way to achieve that is "working my tail off to help them raise money."

But can Block switch from Virginia horse country and Southern courtesy to life amid Wilshire Boulevard high-rises and L.A.'s fractious politics?

He says he is prepared. In fact, Block proudly — and somewhat comically — shows a visitor that he has programmed his car radio to satellite channel reports of L.A. traffic jams, bizarre bulletins to hear in central Virginia.

"I'm not worried. I'm really not," he said of the shift. "Part of it is my background. I came out of an environment that was New Yorkish. It wasn't New York City, but it was New Yorkish, pretty intense, pretty in-your-face. Much more blunt than what I'm dealing with now. So this is not foreign to me. People in L.A., some of them, are more direct than they are in Virginia. And I kind of like that style."

Despite their differences, UCLA and Virginia have similarities. Both are state institutions with high admissions standards, fiercely proud alumni, vaunted athletic programs and important hospitals and law schools. They hold nearly identical spots in U.S. News & World Report's ranking of national universities. (Virginia tied for 24th with the University of Michigan, and UCLA came next.)

Block also stressed that his West Coast credentials began with childhood visits to relatives in Santa Monica and continued into his college days.

The grandson of Eastern European immigrants, Block grew up in Monticello, a racetrack town about 70 miles northwest of New York that catered

mainly to Jewish families on Borscht Belt vacations. As a teenager, he worked for his father during summers, delivering milk and yogurt to hotels and bungalow colonies. His mother was a nurse.

Block describes himself as a science nerd but not a top high school student. In an admission that will hearten many teens, he said he was unfocused and had a rocky start in college.

He was headed to a campus of the State University of New York. Then, despite their parents' opposition, his older brother, Michael, a Stanford University graduate student at the time, persuaded him to come to California. Block enrolled at Foothill Community College near Stanford and then transferred to UC Berkeley. He left after a semester, feeling Berkeley "was too big for someone who wasn't mature enough."

Again at the urging of his brother — who later became an economics professor at the University of Arizona — Block switched to Stanford, where he fit in better and met friends headed to careers in academia.

"It was amazing," he recalled. "I just thought being around a university was a gift. My brother was absolutely right.... These are great institutions to be around, where people spend time thinking deeply about things and where evidence and data are important. I was impressed; I was converted."

Block earned his bachelor's degree at Stanford and doctorate in psychology at the University of Oregon. He did postdoctoral neurobiology research at Stanford before landing the first professorship he applied for: the one in Virginia.

It clearly is not easy to leave after all this time — even for a UC salary of \$416,000, free housing on campus and other perks. The Blocks, who have two grown children, are selling their off-campus modernist country house, and he is parting with the 1974 red Porsche 911 he has tinkered with — often in failure, he says. They are, however, taking the 40 antique radios he bought mainly on eBay as a distraction from writing research papers.

At Virginia, most people say they are saddened at Block's departure and describe him, despite a few painful controversies, as a fair, hardworking administrator who especially impressed them by keeping his hand in research.

"He is just one of those people who can keep a thousand balls in the air at the same time and do it in a gentle, nice manner. He is really gifted at that," said Carla Green, a biology professor who is also researching biological clocks.

Eric Patashnik, a politics professor at Virginia who previously taught at UCLA, called Block's move a "huge loss" for the university.

"I think the breadth of UCLA will be exciting for him. He is somebody equally comfortable in his lab and in planning programs outside his research expertise," Patashnik said. "He's a very optimistic, energetic person. I think his personality will fit in very well with Los Angeles."

Patashnik, who describes himself as a bit of an insomniac, said he has exchanged live e-mails with Block at 5 a.m. and at 11 p.m. Block, he said, "works very, very long days, and he doesn't seem to lose focus."

Block is well known internationally in neurobiology. Last year, his lab received widespread attention for simulating frequent time zone changes and proving they can hasten death in older mice. His group is now exposing younger mice to shifting light times to mimic the changes in work hours facing pilots or employees at 24-hour warehouses.

"This area is so fascinating — that the brain has this ability to act like an alarm clock and control your sleep-wake cycle," he said. "I've never deviated from that view. I'm as excited now about biological timing as I was 35 years ago."

Block, who was a co-inventor of a non-contact breathing monitor to save babies from sudden infant death syndrome, said he intends to continue his research at UCLA. He is steeling for possible protests by groups opposed to research using animals and said he will enforce the heightened security that interim UCLA Chancellor Norman Abrams imposed last year after threats against faculty.

Even in casual conversation, the scientist in Block is apparent. He often stresses the need for solid evidence, whether on the career paths of faculty women or how campus security should be tightened in the wake of the April massacre at Virginia Tech, another state university about 150 miles away.

"He is not one to do things for theatrics or ceremony alone. I think there is too much of the practical scientist for just empty ceremony," said Marcia Childress, a former Faculty Senate chairwoman who leads a humanities program at Virginia's medical school.

She and others also described Block as deft at handling tense situations.

The diplomacy came into play in 2002 when the Virginia school debated joining other universities in supporting a new telescope in Arizona that some Apaches considered an affront to sacred ground. At the urging of faculty, Block met with Native American leaders in Arizona and helped improve relationships there before the university went ahead with its \$4-million investment in the telescope. Then Block reached out to Indians in Virginia, leading to tribal conferences on campus and more efforts to enroll Native American students.

In April, the Virginia tribes thanked Block by giving him a ceremonial peace pipe. Chief Kenneth Adams of the Upper Mattaponi tribe said he was initially skeptical of Block's motives but now believes that his interest in helping the tribes is genuine and that he is "a good person with a good heart."

Not everyone wholly agrees.

"Gene Block is well practiced in the art of Southern politeness and cooptation," said Guy Lopez, a University of Virginia graduate student who led protests there against the telescope and thinks Block courted the Virginia tribes to deflect the Arizona furor. "It's a disarming, Southern-gentlemanly

approach that allows people to feel something will happen. It's just polite, tactical maneuvering, which allows him to say we are doing something but in the end means nothing."

Block more recently faced faculty complaints that he pushed the university too quickly to become the academic sponsor of the Semester at Sea, a program that takes students abroad on a classroom and dorm ship. Some Virginia professors questioned the educational merits of the classes, which had been run by the University of Pittsburgh, and some were angry that Block had not consulted them.

The ship debate was a lesson for Block in campus governance, said Kenneth Schwartz, an architecture professor and chairman of Virginia's Faculty Senate. "I think you could actually argue this is a good thing for UCLA," said Schwartz, who admires Block's leadership.

In the end, Block apologized to the faculty and said he acted "a little too top-down." But the program survived, and the ship is headed to Latin America this summer.

larry.gordon@latimes.com

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

UCLA leadership

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The titles have changed from director to provost to chancellor, but only eight people have held the formal leadership spot at UCLA since its founding in 1919. The school has also had temporary heads, such as Norman Abrams, who has been interim chancellor for the last year. Gene D. Block will become chancellor Aug. 1.

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Ernest Carroll Moore, 1919-36

Earle Raymond Hedrick, 1937-42

Clarence Addison Dykstra, 1945-50

Raymond Bernard Allen, 1952-59

Vern Oliver Knudsen, 1959-60

Franklin David Murphy, 1960-68

Charles E. Young, 1968-97

Albert Carnesale, 1997-2006

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Source: UCLA

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