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Electrical and Computer Engineering Honor Society

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Career Synopsis

Dr. Michael J. Carey has just reentered academia as a Bren Professor of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of California, Irvine. Prior to his reentry, Dr. Carey was a Senior Engineering Director at BEA Systems, Inc. and an Architect at Oracle Corporation following their acquisition of BEA. He managed the BEA XQuery language engineering team and served as chief architect for the company's AquaLogic Data Services Platform middleware product. Before joining BEA in 2001, he spent a dozen years as a University of Wisconsin-Madison Computer Science faculty member, five years as an IBM Almaden database researcher and research group manager, and a year and a half at an e-commerce software startup, Propel Software. Dr. Carey is an ACM Fellow, a member of the National Academy of Engineering, and a past recipient of the ACM SIGMOD Edgar F. Codd Innovations Award.

Career Highlights

What do you view as the highlights of your career? These can be in terms of greatest challenges, most satisfying achievements, or most enjoyable projects.

I've thoroughly enjoyed each phase of my career. During my time at UW-Madison, we had one of the top database research groups in the world, and I got to work with a terrific bunch of faculty colleagues and CS graduate students. I think the highlight of that part of my career only became clear to me later, however, when bumping into former undergrads and grad students who'd taken my database classes years ago. I've recently come to realize that my most satisfying achievement has been playing some part in launching them on their own careers. Survivors of my classes have gone on to be successful software engineers, software researchers, industry executives, company founders, and university professors. It's a really good feeling to think that maybe I somehow played a role in their career successes (or at least that I didn't scar them beyond the possibility of recovery).

Education and Career

Relate your education to your career and current responsibilities.

My undergraduate education had a strong emphasis on problem-solving, and that's certainly helped. However, in grad school, the focus is on learning how to learn - i.e., to learn new things on your own - and I think that was by far the most important part of my education. That allows you to move within a technical area, or even change areas, and pick up the necessary knowledge to be effective in that new area. If you have a limited attention span, as most of us ultimately do, that helps to keep your career fresh and fun.

Advice to Engineering Graduates

What specific advice would you offer to engineering students as they complete their education and prepare to launch their careers?

I would encourage them to focus on what I just mentioned: Learn how to learn! If your professor gives you reading assignments and then tests you on them without covering them in class, quit whining - he or she is helping you to pick up one of the key skills that you'll need in order to have a long, successful career that won't eventually become boring. College is not (just) about



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learning the technology of the day - in the software world, programming languages have changed significantly over the years, for example, and in the hardware world we've gone from transistors to ICs to computer chips that are starting to have more processor cores than we know how to utilize effectively today. It's a sure thing that you'll have to track similar changes over the course of your careers, so be ready!