Professor Sally Sperling, who pioneered senior roles for women in the University of California Academic Senate, passed away on January 1, 2010.

In 1972-73 Prof. Sperling became the first woman to serve as Chair of the Assembly of the UC Academic Senate (system-wide), an achievement of which she was justly proud. It was more than another decade before a woman again headed the UC Senate. Dr. Sperling had previously served as Chair of the Riverside division, where she held influential positions for two decades, including chairing the Committee on Academic Personnel (CAP) and the Budget Committee.

Prof. Sperling was an experimental psychologist. Her dissertation at the University of Michigan was on classical (Pavlovian) conditioning and extinction in goldfish. Her research then shifted to rats and pigeons, as she investigated stimulus generalization and stimulus discrimination, that is, learning which cues and situations generalize and which should be reacted to as different. In an influential and well-cited article in Psychological Bulletin on reversal learning and resistance to extinction, Dr. Sperling reviewed and analyzed the laboratory rat literature to provide new insight into over-training and behavior maintenance or reversal.

Prof. Sperling also faced the lowest of the lows. In the spring of 1985 she was one of the victims of vandalism, theft and destruction of data, when members of the Animal Liberation Front broke into UCR laboratories, took hundred of animals and caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage. In a heart-breaking article entitled “I Was Violated” in the APA Monitor (sent to all members of the American Psychological Association), Dr. Sperling explained that she knew “with an awful certainty” that her life was permanently changed on that day, as her lab was trashed and years of data destroyed. Still, ever the scientist, Sperling wrote that “It helps a little to realize that I’ve got a textbook case of one-trial traumatic avoidance learning.” Ironically, Prof. Sperling was a committed and involved scientist hoping to use science to serve humanity, serving twice as chair of the APA Board of Scientific Affairs.

During the 1960’s, she helped develop the Psychology Department at UCR as it became a Ph.D.-granting department. For example, she helped secure and lead a federal training grant that enabled the new department to attract some of the better students in that era; this is another good illustration of Sally's service, as well as her positive impact on graduate education. She was known as a strong mentor for graduate students, setting exceptionally high standards for them as for herself. She was also especially supportive of her junior faculty colleagues.

In 1978, nine distinguished psychologists, including Prof. Sperling, were asked to comment on “Psychology and the Future.” Prof. Sperling’s answer presciently emphasized “program evaluation,” including “evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of different
social systems and using these data to modify existing societies or to create new ones able to provide more optimum fulfillment and satisfaction for their citizens.”

She was married to the influential learning theorist Kenneth MacCorquodale, who died in 1986. In her later years, Sally engaged in philanthropic activities with a number of organizations and was, for example, publicly thanked by the San Diego Food Bank, which said that her gifts “will make a difference for generations to come.”

Howard S. Friedman (Chair), David H. Warren, B. Glenn Stanley