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TERRY O'BANION INTERVIEW (April 29th, 2003)

D. G.: Could you tell us something about your background.

T. O.: I started out as a high school English teacher in a small, rural school in South Florida. I then became a dean of students at Central Florida Jr. College in 1960. This was a time when community colleges were just taking off. As you know, the '60s was our great boom period, and we were establishing community colleges at the rate of one every week around the country. I was a very fortunate person, having just come out of a master's degree program in counseling at the University of Florida. I had a chance to become the dean of students at this small community college in central Florida at the age of 25; that's how desperate colleges were then for administrators! I was a green kid from the sticks who had not even driven a car out of my county when I went off to college. I really had little background or understanding of the larger world and found myself in a wonderful position to learn at a very rapid rate, which I did.

I had an extraordinarily good mentor in the college president, Joe Fordyce, who was a friend of mine. I had worked with him as an undergraduate student at the University of Florida. He took me under his tutelage and really gave me lots of opportunities to grow and expand. We were at Central Florida for about three years. At the same time I was working on my doctorate in higher education at Florida State University at Tallahassee. Then Joe and I moved to Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, Florida in 1964 and used it as a laboratory for trying out some of our key ideas about education. Both of us came out of counseling and English. We had some very strong ideas about how education ought to be, and we created what became a "learning college for the 20th century."

Santa Fe became an extraordinary institution that received a lot of national acclaim. Just to give you an idea, we never organized the faculty into departments. They were always organized into units, and they still are today. There are 16 faculty members in each unit representing every discipline and every vocational area working as a team to achieve the goals of the college. We had a strong statement, "The Santa Fe Commitment" that defined our core values regarding human nature and educational processes, and we used that statement of values as the basis for selecting all faculty and staff. We wanted people with a strong commitment to these core values that are reflected today in the principles of the learning college.

So these ideas were established a long time ago. The learning college idea is a continuing idea in education. It's actually a continuation of a long-standing set of ideas that surface every decade or so. They certainly surfaced in John Dewey's progressive education. They surfaced again in the humanistic education movement of the '60s, and that's the movement that Joe Fordyce and I were grounded in. We were deeply engaged in processes related to humanistic education. I was schooled in that philosophy at the

University of Florida. My professorial mentor was Arthur Combs who introduced me personally to Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Can you imagine a hick like me having dinner at Comb's home with just Combs and Maslow and then on another occasion with Combs and Rogers? These were the people who formed my perspectives on the educational process, and we utilized their theories to create Santa Fe Community College. It is no surprise that my first book was "The Shared Journey: An Introduction to Encounter" and that one of the first courses I taught at Illinois was on Humanistic Education.

We had no 'Fs' at Santa Fe. We had an A, B, C grading system, and if students weren't successful, they continued until they were successful. We had learning communities which are very popular today. All our courses were designed around behavioral objectives, and we urged all faculty to create opportunities for active and collaborative learning. The interest in learning-centered education today reflects, in part, what occurred at Santa Fe and similar colleges in the '60s

While helping Joe Fordyce to found Santa Fe I was completing a dissertation that involved a national study of an ideal program to prepare college student personnel administrators. One of the key people on my committee was Miriam Sheldon, famous dean of women at the University of Illinois. During that process Miriam became fascinated by this Florida "Cracker" and urged me to come to Illinois to join a new higher education program.

Around 1967 the state of Illinois had finally made a commitment to create a statewide system of community colleges. As I recall, part of that commitment involved a higher education program at the University of Illinois with a specialization in the community college. Miriam Sheldon was connected with the program that included Joanne Fley in student personnel and Ernie Anderson in community colleges. I went for an interview with the Dean of the COE, Rupert Evans. I was fascinated by the possibility of becoming a professor because I thought I could have more influence as a professor than as a dean of a community college. I was also warmly welcomed by the professors in the Counseling Department because of my background in Humanistic Education and counseling. So in 1967 I came to the U of I as an assistant professor of higher education whose special interest was the community college and Humanistic Education.

The program included some great professors, but it never quite got off the ground. The program was never very well supported by the university. I worked diligently across the state of Illinois. Three community college presidents in Illinois were doctoral students of mine; Terry Ludwig at Shawnee is still working—Chuck Novak has retired from Richland, and Larry Huffman has retired from Kankakee. They were wonderful young men and had as much influence on me as I had on them. I addressed all kinds of state conventions in Illinois. I probably consulted at half of the community colleges in the state. When I first came to Illinois I had published one article. In five years I became a full professor, so you can imagine what I did in those five years. I published lots of articles, I got grants, I did research, and I wrote a book or two. I had a wonderful group of graduate students.

After five years, Berkeley asked me to be a visiting professor for a year to create a college student personnel program. I fell in love with California and decided I could not die in a cornfield. I wrote an infamous poem called *God Don't Let me Die in a Cornfield*, and some friends in Illinois still pass that poem around. It's a statement of the difficulty of living in the flat lands of Illinois—sandwiched between the cold black earth and the cold grey sky. I decided I was going to leave Illinois, even though I had become a full professor with lifetime tenure at a Big 10 university, and loved being a professor. I sat down with my wife and we looked at places we wanted to live and California was one of them. Very shortly thereafter, I was selected as the President of the League for Innovation in the Community College and in 1975 moved to LA. After 23 years with the League I retired in December 1999, in time to start a new millennium. These days, I'm working more than I ever did. I have four contracts with four different national firms. It's very exciting stuff and I greatly enjoy it.

D. G.: What year was it that you published your article on counseling students on choosing careers and academic advising?

T. O.: At Central Florida Community College in the 1960s academic advising was a thorn in our side, as it is in every institution's side. No one is ever satisfied with academic advising. As my first foray into the professional field I was very interested in how academic advising actually works. It is one of the most important events in a student's life, and we don't do a very good job of it. So I did an analysis of the steps in academic advising. The outcome was an article that I published in 1972 called "An Academic Advising Model for the Junior College." It apparently struck a cord in the field. NACADA, the national association for academic advisers, several years ago identified my article and one by Burns Crookston as all-time classics and devoted an entire issue of their journal to a retrospective on these two articles. The American College Testing program adopted my work as the O'Banion Model of Academic Advising. There are many colleges today that still use the basic model I created which involved stating the key steps that a student needed to complete before instruction begins:

Those steps are:

1. You need to help the student examine life goals.
2. You need to help the student make decisions about vocational goals.
3. You need to help the student make decisions about the program—what do I major in? Or, to note that the student is undecided..
4. You need to help the student make decisions about what courses to take this semester.
5. You need to help the student make registration decisions—what time do I take these courses and with whom, etc.

That simple schema helped staff understand that it doesn't take a professional counselor or a full-time faculty member to help students make decisions at every stage along that five-point continuum. You need certain people to help at the top level, but when it comes to making decisions about which courses to take this term and how to register for them

classified staff or well-trained students can do the job. In addition to the five steps I listed the qualifications of the personnel needed to assist with each of the steps, and that was as important as describing the process of academic advising. Apparently the model has stood the test of time for over 30 years.

D. G.: Looking back at the many points at which you have been able to influence the community college, what is it that you feel the most satisfaction about?

T: I feel the most satisfaction about the Learning College idea because it brings together ideas that I have been deeply committed to from the time I was a high school teacher. My early education at the University of Florida was in progressive education and later in humanistic education—and when I was a high school teacher in rural schools in South Florida, I was trying to implement various aspects of what later became the Learning College. When I first came to the community colleges, I couldn't articulate what I was doing then. I was a kid and I didn't have the theoretical background and experience. But I knew that education had to be better than what I was seeing and what some of my colleagues were doing. So I continued to struggle with these concerns, and as I matured and gained my "sea legs," I began to better understand what I was doing. I never stopped exploring and experimenting with the ideas that came from my early education and my own value base as a person. And I was very fortunate to have many colleagues along the way who shared these ideas. In the Learning College those ideas came to full fruition, and, to date, that's what I feel most satisfied about.

D. G.: Can you tell us more about how you drew from all your experiences and the mentors that you had to develop the Learning College concept.

T. O.: I think there are three basic skills or driving forces in my life that has guided everything that I have accomplished:

1. First, education for me was my religion. Humanistic education in particular was a secular religion for me. Very early I had established a strong value-base in terms of what I thought education should be and that has stayed with me for my entire life.
2. Secondly, I think I have pretty good conceptual skills and am able to pull disjointed ideas together to create new, practical, and simple constructs that help explain things. I don't know where that skill comes from, probably from my early training in English and writing. If you're a pretty good writer, you have to have good conceptual skills. I think I know how to connect the dots. One of my friends says that I am a good "mesher."
3. Finally, I think I have good entrepreneurial skills. I dream big dreams and I can get support for making them happen. I have a pretty good vision of the possibilities in education, and I think I have the practical and entrepreneurial skills to put them into practice. One of the reasons I've been so successful in the League is that I know how to design projects, and I know how to create the political climate to get funding for them. During my time in the League, I garnered over \$50 million dollars in support for projects. Another friend calls me a Scholar-Entrepreneur.

D. G.: What has been the biggest indicator or factor that has helped you realize that a learning-focused college was needed?

T. O.: I was really impressed with the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. That was one of the most substantive national expressions recognizing that we were in real trouble with education in this country. The National Commission on Excellence, as you remember, talked about “a rising tide of mediocrity.” This was 1983—here I was at the League for Innovation—very involved in national activities and reform efforts—and I was very impressed with the recommendations in that report. I stayed tune to what followed.

After ten years of reform efforts, from 1983 to 1993, the critics concluded that we were worse off after 10 years of education reform than we were in the beginning. That really caught my attention. Then there was another report in 1993 called *The American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*. That higher education report said the same thing—we are in deep trouble as a society—we are not sure what to do about all this failure. We tried a variety of reforms—we actually spent 50% more on education between 1983 and 1993 than we had the previous decade—and after 10 years we were worse off than we were at the beginning. That made me begin to think, as many others were saying, that there was something crucially wrong with the basic design of education.

We needed a re-conceptualization of how to design and how to organize the educational enterprise. I began looking at the community college and realized that we were focused almost entirely on teaching rather than learning. I had read in the *American Imperative* that if we were going to reform education we would have to overhaul the curricular, organizational, and social architecture of education and place learning first. Now that really rang a bell with me—one of those “ah-hah” moments. I began talking and writing about placing learning first in every policy, program, practice, and in the way we use our personnel. And I discovered that a handful of community colleges embraced these ideas without using the language of learning. “A Learning College for the 21st Century” became a blueprint for the ideas I had struggled with for decades and that a small group of community colleges had been trying to implement more recently. One of the last grants I got at the League was one for \$1.4 million to work with 12 Vanguard Learning Colleges to create models of learning-centered education.

D. G.: What do you think is the best way to evaluate Learning College outcomes and determine whether a college is on-track to becoming a Learning College?

T. O.: There are two key issues here:

1. It’s very difficult for an institution to become a Learning College unless there is an institution-wide commitment to values related to placing learning first, along with strong leadership from presidents and key leaders, including unions. It’s very hard for colleges to transform themselves into Learning Colleges because colleges are used to looking at every new innovation or idea that comes along and adapting a portion of it. They don’t change very much. We saw that with TQM.

- We saw that with humanistic education, with accountability measures, with assessment measures, with technology. Colleges have an uncanny ability to ingest a new idea, like an amoeba, without changing themselves very much. The Learning College requires a commitment to total transformation of the institution in which programs, practices, policies, and personnel responsibilities are about placing learning first. We're talking about major institutional change, and that is a very long row to hoe for institutions.
2. The second issue relates to the best way to evaluate whether a college has become successful at placing learning first. We may be able to improve upon this in the future, but for the moment, the best way to evaluate that is to create learning outcomes for every course, every program, and for the entire institution. These learning outcomes then provide a template by which the institution evaluates the learning of every student in every learning experience in which students are involved. These can then be extrapolated upward to evaluate the success of the institution. We've got to replace the old institutional effectiveness indicators with new indicators of success related to learning outcomes for every course, and we have to measure what this student has learned and what this student can do as a result of that learning. That has not been the focus in the past, and we have these primitive mechanisms called grades which we use as indicators of student learning. That just won't cut it for the 21st century.

D. G.: Going back to whole college or whole system reform. What does it take to carry out a whole system reform?

T. O: It takes a strong commitment from the college president, the board of trustees, and key faculty leaders. It takes an understanding of what learning can be. It takes an understanding of how to change an institution that was designed for an agricultural and industrial economy. It takes a lot of understanding on the part of leaders about the change process. It requires a commitment to a "culture of evidence" rather than, as Kay McClenney says, a "culture of anecdote." It requires a ten year commitment to even become grounded in the process. Frankly most community college leaders don't have the ability or the time or the interest to make that transformation become a reality. College leaders are so engaged in so many complex problems these days that it becomes increasingly difficult for them to focus on the idea of transforming their institutions into more learning-centered enterprises. I think there's a great deal of interest. There are probably 100 or maybe even 200 community colleges working toward that end, but it's a long haul.

D. G.: Looking to the future, what is it going to take to sustain the Learning College reform, to carry the momentum into the next decade and further?

T. O.: Two things. First, it will take some real examples of success in the colleges that have made a deep commitment to this idea. We're beginning to see some of those examples. Take a look at the community college of Denver which has one of the longest commitments-- about 15 years-- to the Learning College idea. They have made extraordinarily significant changes in the success of their at-risk students. A book by

John and Suanne Roueche has been written about the Community College of Denver and its success with at-risk students. In short, over a ten-year period, the at-risk student population at the College doubled so that over 50% of their students are at risk. During that same period of time, the graduation rate of that at-risk student population has tripled. That's an absolute miracle. No college in the country has ever accomplished what they have done. They have done that because they are committed to the Learning College principles. These kinds of outstanding success stories will help to drive continued interest in the Learning College.

Second, I expect that we will continue to get a lot of information about the failure of traditional education. That may prompt colleges to look at new models of education. Publications and studies are going to continue to emerge over the next decade or so telling us that education is a failing enterprise. Sometimes that will prompt transformation.

D. G.: Was the League for Innovation able to fulfill its promise during the time you were there?

T: I think the League has fulfilled its promise beyond its wildest expectations. The League was formed in 1967 with a small group of 12 colleges dedicated to exchanging information about innovations with each other. They never intended to become a national force in community college education. Now, the League is celebrating its 35th anniversary, and *Change Magazine*, several years ago, dubbed it "the most dynamic organization in the community college world."

The League has created hundreds of innovative projects of all kinds and has received over \$60 million in funding. The League has a long list of dynamic publications about learning and about technology, all on the cutting edge of innovation in community colleges. It has created an alliance in which over 700 community colleges from around the world have joined as members. It holds the premier annual conference on information technology, pretty much in all of higher education, but surely in the community college field. We started that conference about 1983-84. The League has a corporate membership of over 100 corporate members we started over 15 years ago that has offered tremendous support for the League and to hundreds of community colleges. The history of the League has been well documented in dissertations, and the elders of the League will say it has exceeded their wildest dreams.

D. G.: What do you feel are the most significant challenges facing the community college and how do you think that community colleges will evolve?

T. O.: Community colleges are going through mission creep, and over the next ten years they are going to have to deal with questions about what the mission really is. A major aspect of this is the new addition of bachelor's degrees in community colleges. That will probably change the nature of the community college as substantively as any other factor.

The community college has already become the premier purveyor of workforce training in the U.S. and is likely to continue to develop in this direction. The League recently received a \$12.5 million project from the U.S. Dept. of Education to create national models of college and career transition between high schools and community colleges. I'm involved as one of the evaluators of the project. Community colleges will continue to evolve in their roles in workforce training. I have no idea what forms this will take, but it will be exciting and major.

I don't know when the breakthrough will come for our commitment to remedial education. We are the last institutions in higher education that are really serious about remedial and developmental education. It is the toughest task in all of higher education and someone has to do it. I don't know whether or not the community colleges will have a breakthrough in which they figure out how to do it appropriately. Alternatively, they might shuck this mission off and hand it over to another institution because they have failed to accomplish it adequately. I don't know what will happen in that arena, but I think it will be one of the issues community colleges will struggle with as they continue to evolve over the next 10-20 years.

Finally, we are currently facing a major crisis in leadership. We do not have programs to prepare enough new doctoral students to become the future presidents, vice presidents, and program leaders that we need. Unless something is done to address that situation, we are going to be in great trouble. The issues are harder, the enterprise is more complex, and we are spending fewer resources preparing leaders today than we did in 1960. I have just been appointed Director of the Community College Leadership Program for Walden University charged with creating a new and innovative program to address the leadership crisis. I thought I had retired, but I have discovered that I only retired from the League. The opportunity to work with good colleagues to create this new venture in leadership makes the juices flow, so I am off to my next great adventure in community college land.