

# QUEST FOR QUALITY

## *Metamorphic Trip*

By Terry O'Banion

**N**ot unlike others who anchored their careers in the community college in the 1960s, my values have shifted remarkably during the past two decades. I was initiated into community college ideals in 1962 as a 25-year-old dean of students at Central Florida Junior College in Ocala, and my 1960's value base came to full fruition at Santa Fe Community College, Gainesville, Florida, in 1967.

In these two Florida community colleges values were nourished in me that produced abundantly during my seven years as a professor of community college education at the University of Illinois and University of California-Berkeley. These values were less visible during my five years as executive director of the League for Innovation in the Community College as I honed new skills. But now, after my two years as vice chancellor of educational affairs with the Dallas County Community College District, they are beginning to bud again, in great contrast to their original flowering in the 1960s, as I assume a second tenure as executive director of the League. Briefly, I will chart my journey, paying special attention to two experiences in two community college environs that reflect the nature of my values migration.

My experience in the community college

spans only 20 years, and I have another 20 to go; but in these first two decades my values regarding student learning have shifted in ways that are sometimes perplexing to me, that call into question my commitment to consistency. I have moved from a 1960's value base to a 1980's value base. In my continuing quest for quality I have traveled a somewhat boggy and sometimes thorny road from Santa Fe to Dallas to Los Angeles.

It was all so clear to me in the mid-sixties when Joe Fordyce and I dreamed together and established Santa Fe Community College. It would be a student-centered institution (as all community colleges were, of course), but ours would *really* be student-centered, in practice as well as in catalog statement. And it was. We pushed out the boundaries of the then popular "humanistic education" credo. We established the Santa Fe Commitment and carefully selected administrators and faculty whose values were reflected in that commitment:

1. The student is the central focus for the process of learning.
2. Teaching occurs only when students learn.
3. Effective educational experiences will modify human behavior in a positive manner.
4. All human beings are motivated to

achieve that which they believe is good.

5. Education should be an exciting, creative, and rewarding experience for the student and for the teacher.

6. All human beings have worth, dignity, and potential.

7. Experimentation and innovation are reflections of attitudes; when they are translated into practice, the process of education can be significantly advanced.

8. Traditional concepts of education (the lecture, the 30-student class, the 50-minute period, the standard textbook, the term course, the F grade, the rectangular classroom, the student desk) are suspect and in need of careful trial and evaluation to a degree at least equal to, and perhaps more than, new and innovative practices.

Santa Fe was different. There were no F and D grades. There was no entrance testing. All students were required to take a three-hour credit course in personal development using the encounter group process. Individual study courses for three hours credit were available in unlimited quantities. The ratio of students to counselors was 100 to 1. Faculty taught only four sections of 25 students each. There were no faculty groupings along the usual discipline-oriented divisions or departments. Faculty and staff were carefully selected for their commitment to this perspective. I was very young, and I was

very much in tune with the dynamics of the 1960s. And interestingly enough, I was well rewarded for a position that seems now to me a bit naive.

My journey through the university and the League for Innovation added to my skills; my idealism matured into a healthy cynicism; my perspectives became broader and deeper. I was both activist and analyst.

At the University of Illinois students challenged me and I them. Through the mentoring process I prepared bright minds to enter the fray as community college administrators. Perhaps I became more pragmatic about community college work then because I was protective of them; more likely I was simply maturing. At the League there was endless possibility, endless challenge. It is important to have national forums that seek out and recognize excellence in practice and in leadership. It was a good time, but in the later years I was growing detached and hungered for more immediate contact, perhaps for a second initiation experience that would match those early days in Florida.

I was fortunate to land in Dallas as vice chancellor of the Dallas County Commu-

nity College District where my longing for daily contact with a smaller, visible community of colleagues and my desire to try out ideas once again in the hands-on atmosphere of the frontline trenches were attended to almost immediately. In spite of Thomas Wolfe's admonition, I was back home in a community college with yet another values reckoning in store for me.

I had not been at my new home long when different values regarding student learning whipped the executive council into a frenzy and reawakened my own questing spirit regarding values. The split-vote recommendation that triggered the turmoil seemed innocent enough: Move the student drop deadline from the 14th to the 10th week. Seven presidents and seven district staff members exploded in a series of positions. "Students need to take more responsibility for their own learning." "Students have the right to fail." "Community college students need every opportunity to succeed." "You want to close the open door." "I'm not an elitist, but..." It was a joyful circus of points of view. It was the 1960s versus the 1980s. It was confusion and confrontation over the transition of values.

We were probably representative of many community college leaders across the country who were having difficulty adapting to new conditions and new needs. We felt the need to act. We knew that new standards and clear expectations were needed, but we did not want to take a position that risked closing the open door. We struggled, and we forced each other to look within for answers.

It was a touchstone experience for me. I was pulled between my earlier 1960's values and the values that seemed more appropriate for my 1980's self. I still wanted students to have the freedom to grow, but I felt more prescriptive, more directive. I still wanted students to have a second chance, and even a third and fourth, but I wanted them to make some commitments, take some responsibility, show some progress. I wanted education to continue to be accessible to students, but I wanted to see excellent performance as an outcome for such an opportunity. Out of this tension I developed a concept of mutual responsibility that might be stated this way:

*Educators* must assume full responsibility to build and maintain learning experiences that increase the probability of student learning.

*Students* must assume responsibility to fulfill expectations of the learning experiences in which they choose to participate.

In practice I now support required written assessment of all entering credit students, required placement in basic skills courses for students who are deficient, and required exit competencies in these courses. I have developed a kind of urgen-

cy and, I hope, maturity that is ready to push for excellence, to provide not only the support we offered at Santa Fe but also clearer, more rigorous structures in which to deal with the complexity our students represent.

And now, unexpectedly, that same urgency, an urgency about the values we hold, is what propels me back to the position of executive director of the League for Innovation. Working with the Dallas community colleges rekindled a kind of zealot fire in me. It is a maturer energy than in my Florida days, an energy melled by the understanding that there are no simple answers. But it is forceful enough to make me want to enlarge my sphere of influence.

Given the social pressure to return to quality, I want to help ensure that we do our work well. Some colleges may resort to the quick fix and brutally force the institution and its students into line with the new standards. More humane colleges will recognize the complexity of changing to a new set of values and will move cautiously and gracefully to implementation strategies. That is the way it will be with the Dallas community colleges; I am convinced of that. And a part of me will always stay in Dallas to cheer my colleagues on, but now I also have a chance to work with 17 other community college districts as they make the pilgrimage.

Those of us on the quest for quality recognize that it will be extremely difficult to implement new policies that will assure the greatest good for the greatest number. And we will struggle mightily with the challenge of exceptions we all know must and will be made in any humane system. But let me suggest a beginning. Do what I have done here only briefly. Chart your personal journey as an educator. Before the hard challenge of implementation comes the tough task of decision. What is your value base regarding student learning? How has it changed, matured? These are the essential questions. If they are not addressed, the community college as we know it today may cease to exist and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be. ■



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