Metro State: The Early Years

Kevin J. Franken

fz2751fb@metrostate.edu

In 1970, there were six state colleges spread throughout Minnesota. Ted Mitau, the chancellor of the Minnesota State College System, realized that a college located in the Twin Cities would be a benefit to the state. So, with help from the Citizens League, Mitau lobbied the state legislature to fund such a college. Eventually, the bill passed and was signed by the governor on June 7, 1971. Initial funding for the project was set at $300,000. This event marked the birth of Minnesota Metropolitan State College (MMSC) — later to become Metropolitan State University.

Mitau’s vice chancellor for academic affairs, David Sweet, was appointed founding president of MMSC. Sweet once said “Higher education today is in great difficulty, awaiting significant innovation, experimentation and reform.” This statement dovetailed with Mitau’s nickname for MMSC during its early days: the “Grand Experiment.” The school was an experiment because of its unique institutional style; it was a post-secondary college designed to allow working adults to continue their education.

In contrast to the University of Minnesota, a traditional four-year school, admissions at MMSC catered to non-traditional students who had completed a wide variety of college-level studies. At the time, MMSC was one of only nine such colleges in the country. The school gained national media attention and was covered by such publications as U.S.Newsand World Report*,* The Washington PostandThe New York Times.

Susan Rydell, a Professor of Psychology at Metro State, thinks that MMSC was even more unique than that. A former associate professor of education at the University of Minnesota, Rydell was hired as a faculty adviser at MMSC in December of 1971. She points out that most senior colleges required incoming students to have a substantial number of credits, usually the equivalent of two years at a junior college. However, Rydell always thought of MMSC as “more of a degree-completion college, because we had students with a mishmash of credits coming in the door.”

Many of these students were housewives looking to complete their education. Others were veterans home from the Vietnam War, ready to finish their degrees. “We filled that niche for a lot of people who were left out of higher education, or didn’t finish,” says Rydell. “They stopped to have a baby, or went to war, or went to prison.” Rydell also works with state correctional facilities as an adviser for inmates pursuing their degrees. She claims that there is a dramatic reduction in recidivism for those who do.

With the University of Minnesota reluctant to take in adult learners, MMSC became a place for those who finished junior college to transfer their credits. According to Rydell, “After two years, there was nowhere to go to continue education. [Metro] filled that void.” Along with other schools, MMSC also pioneered the development of principles for prior learning that are in use today. This led to what would become the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), a nonprofit organization which helps those returning to school improve their adult student experience.

These unconventional methods were in line with the founding principles developed by President Sweet. Instead of letter grades, competence-based narratives were used by teachers, most of whom were working professionals. Along with courses that met at normal class hours, evening and weekend classes were offered for the large number of students who worked during the day. The school itself had no classrooms or campuses. Instead, classes met at libraries, other colleges and in church basements.

Charismatic and motivated, Sweet secured additional funding, hired administrative staff, and set up a small office in a bank building in downtown Saint Paul. Soon after, the school relocated to a second-floor suite above a Walgreens at Seventh Street and Wabasha. The fall semester of 1973 brought with it another move, this time to Metro Square, a downtown office building.

From the beginning, plans for the school included the creation of a learning center in Minneapolis. This learning center also went through several moves. In 1974, it was located in the IDS Building. Later, it moved to 10th Street and Marquette Avenue. The Hennepin Center for the Arts became yet another home for the Minneapolis campus in 1979.

Rydell served as the first dean of the Minneapolis learning center. She remembers two IDS locations. The first was a small space on the 18th floor, and the second was an office on the lower level that had formerly been used as a campaign space for Hubert H. Humphrey. Rydell also remembers the time there was a small fire in the IDS building. It was started in a wastebasket by a faculty member conducting a camping workshop.

Those early days were brimming with out-of-the-box thinking. There were no majors or departments; only individualized degrees were offered. The advising staff worked with each student, assessing their past experiences and future needs. Each student would sign what Rydell called a “learning contract,” and classes were formed based on these contracts. At that time, classes could be anything from a workshop to a special project. Rydell recalls that at one time there were fifty-two classroom sites in the Twin Cities area.

One of the first hints of any structured class was derived from what Rydell described as “common things that groups of students wanted to know.” According to Rydell, “We developed what were called GLOs, short for Growth Learning Opportunities.” Rydell is fond of saying that they “created something out of nothing.”

This inventive mindset has played a role since Rydell first came on board. There were no admission forms, no class schedules, none of the things students take for granted today. But Sweet and his staff had an aggressive plan. Classes officially began on Feb. 1, 1972, with fifty students enrolled in courses. Rydell and four other advisers each took responsibility for ten students, and the first twelve students graduated in 1973.

MMSC first received accreditation in 1975 from the North Central Association, known today as the Higher Learning Commission. In fact, MMSC’s academic standards were so uncommon at the time that a case study was done on the twelve original graduates to formulate the accreditation criteria.

In 1976, Minnesota Metropolitan State College changed its name and became Metropolitan State University.

Photos:

File name: Kevin F- Susan Rydell.jpg

Credit: Kevin Franken

Caption: Susan Rydell has been teaching at Metro since 1971

File name: David Sweet.jpg

Credit: Courtesy of the Metropolitan State University Archives in the Library and Learning Center

Caption: David Sweet was the founding President of Minnesota Metropolitan State College (MMSC), later to become Metropolitan State University.

File name: Flyer.jpg

Credit: Courtesy of the Metropolitan State University Archives in the Library and Learning Center

Caption: A flyer from Minnesota Metropolitan State College