Metro State: The early years part 3

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In the early days of Metropolitan State University, when it was still known by its original name: Minnesota Metropolitan State College, President David Sweet’s innovative thinking led him and others to write *Prospectus I and II*. These documents, which would guide the institution’s early years, included the following principles:

* The college would be adult-focused.
* Admission would be limited to those with the equivalent of two years of college (either through credit transfer or learning gained through prior experience).
* Each student would partner with faculty in writing contracts for what they would learn.
* Education would be competence-based, recognizing learning outside the classroom.
* The college would have not have its own campus, but would use space and learning resources throughout the Twin Cities.
* Most of the faculty would be “community faculty,” working professionals with practical experience in their field.

From these principles, Sweet and the faculty developed five tenets that would be the basis for the university’s educational processes. A modified version of these tenets can still be found in the yearly undergraduate catalog.

1. Students had responsibility and authority over their own education.
2. The college was urban focused.
3. Education was based on competencies, not credits.
4. Five competency areas provided the framework for student learning: basic learning, civic, vocational, cultural-recreational and personal development.
5. Students should be life-long, self-directed learners.

There was a strong emphasis on the fifth tenant. Susan Rydell is currently a Professor of Psychology at Metro State, but at the time she was a faculty advisor. According to Rydell, students were encouraged to “internalize what life-long learning meant. It’s not just about passing a test or reading a textbook, but to continue learning after Metro State.” To which she added, “Why wait? Teach them that mindset while still in school.”

The school utilized these tenets into the 1980s. During this time, there were considerable changes to the school. In 1977, Dr. Reatha Clark King was appointed as Metro State’s second president.

During King’s tenure, other changes were also in the making. With a continued increase in enrollment, the practice of advisors working intensively with individual students became less feasible. Moreover, in areas such as business, human services and accounting, it became redundant to give the same advice to a large number of students.

Coupled with pressure from external forces such as accrediting organizations and other universities, the expanding student population pushed Metro State toward offering more structured, traditional majors. The first major, in nursing, was approved in 1980 and implemented in 1981. The first graduate program was approved in 1983, offering a Masters in Management and Administration (MMA). More majors were added in 1986, in fields such as accounting, human services, professional communications and computer science.

This adjustment brought about changes in other processes at Metro State. According to Rydell, what were once called “Group Learning Opportunities (or GLOs) became known as the traditional class or course.” Rydell added, “More structured degrees came into play, and the faculty’s role evolved from facilitating student learning to teaching courses in the classroom.” Moreover, ten week quarters were eventually replaced with longer semesters.

Another change involved valuing credit over competency. In Metro State’s early years, there were no letter grades or credits awarded. Any sort of grading system, Rydell says, was “outcome-based, built on competency. Sometimes students had already acquired this, and other times they had to achieve it to attain their desired competency.” All student learning was recorded in a narrative transcript. This remained in place until a letter grading policy, including failing grades, was adopted in 1994.

One interesting aspect of this shift involved President King. In 1985, she went before the State University Board and requested that Metro State become a comprehensive four-year institution. The request was denied. Just six years later, in 1991, a Minnesota educational-needs study called for Metro State to become a comprehensive four-year university. This time, the State University Board supported the initiative.

The late 1980s brought with them an enduring transition. With the progression toward becoming a four-year university and enrollment reaching 4,000 in 1985, it became evident that Metro State would need a permanent location. So, in 1988, the former St. John’s hospital was selected as the site for Metro State’s headquarters.

The site, located just east of downtown St. Paul, was chosen by the Minnesota State University Board of Directors, and the state Legislature providing $1.3 million for the land purchase. To mark the beginning of construction at the new Dayton’s Bluff campus, soil was brought in from the seven metropolitan counties for a special “soil-mixing” ceremony.

The building originally on the current New Main site was torn down and rebuilt. Meanwhile, Metro State staff set up shop in the building that became Founders Hall while renovations were being done to St. John’s Hall. Recalling those days, Rydell said that “it even smelled like an old hospital,” adding that “some patient bathrooms were converted to file rooms.” In fact, the tunnel system in place today is left over from the hospital, which provided medical staff a way to transfer patients without exposing them to the harsh Minnesota winters.

Tobin Barrozo was appointed as the third president of Metro State in 1989. In that same year, there were also revisions to the university’s vision and mission, helping to guide it as a four-year institution. In keeping with the continued development of permanent facilities, Metro State’s 1990 Annual Report called for two major campus locations. The Dayton’s Bluff site and another in downtown Minneapolis would serve as core classroom and resource sites. That same year, and after eleven years at the Hennepin Center for the Arts, the Minneapolis campus relocated to Eighth and Hennepin.

In 1991, the State Legislature passed the bill that allowed Metro State to establish the School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice. Two years later, Metro State and Minneapolis Community and Technical College collaborated to offer law enforcement degrees. 1993 was also the year that Susan Cole was appointed as Metro State’s fourth president.

Photos

File name: Former St Johns Hospital.jpg

Photo credit: Courtesy of Metropolitan State University, St. John’s Hospital Archives

Caption: An aerial shot of the St. Johns Hospital site in 1988.

File name:

Photo credit: Wing Young Huie, Courtesy of Metropolitan State University

Caption: In 1977, Dr. Reatha Clark King was appointed as Metro State’s second president.