Bill Jason Priest, Community College Pioneer

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Preface

As people began to learn that I was planning to write the biography of Bill Priest, the responses were expressions of surprise followed by comments of approval. Several added that they could not believe someone had not already done this. Those reactions assured me that my own sense of the importance of this project was shared by others, including not only long-time employees in the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD), but also national leaders in higher education.

My interest in writing about Priest first came about as I attended a seminar while working on my doctorate in higher education at the University of North Texas. Conducted by Professor Barry Lumsden, the seminar focused on the perils and profits of writing a dissertation. I had a topic, a theory base, and a proposal draft that had the approval of my major professor, Howard Smith. As I researched, the topic began to grow and the dissertation seemed to take on a life of its own. I felt overwhelmed and thought I would be graduating in my dotage.

During Lumsden’s discussion of historical studies, the idea revealed itself. Historical research appealed to me because it has a beginning and an end. It goes without saying that I wanted the topic to be significant enough to be worthy of graduate level work. I thought of Bill Priest, founder of the Dallas County Community College District, where I had invested much of my work life. I knew his impact on the community college movement had been more than the founding of the Dallas district. My third motivation was that I would get to interview Priest. I loved to hear him talk. As a communications major, I was fascinated by his variegated use of language and unique verbal imagery.

In my initial research and review of the literature to write my proposal, I was surprised and delighted to learn of the number of
programs and services that Priest had pioneered and/or helped to evolve into national usage. The importance of the community college in higher education loomed large in the literature, and the man on whom I had chosen to focus my research was a major player. This dissertation proved to be a labor of love. I enjoyed meeting or getting to know better other community college leaders my subject required me to interview. It was a special pleasure interviewing Margaret McDermott, who invited me to her home for lunch. Seeing all of the original paintings by renowned artists was an enriching experience. She was gracious and accommodating and I could see why she had been selected to serve on the founding board of trustees and why she and Priest had become friends. She told me how pleased she was that I had chosen Bill Priest for my dissertation research. As a result of my dissertation research, I learned considerably about the DCCCD, and the people who had brought it to life. This was in addition to all I learned about the contributions of Priest and the evolution of junior colleges to comprehensive community colleges.

Writing, of course, is not a one time event. It involves a series of outlines, drafts, rewrites, and more rewrites. At one iteration of my dissertation review by committee, the professor from the University at large, not from my major or minor area, put a red circle around “Bill” each time I had written it in the copy. Also in red at the top of the front page with an arrow pointing to “Bill,” he wrote, “Isn’t this a little informal for a scholarly work?” I explained to him that it was not informal; it was indeed Priest’s given name, not William. In fact, it is a most appropriate name. Bill is Bill. It is an all American down-home name lacking in airs, which is exactly who Priest is. He doesn’t know why his parents chose to name him simply “Bill,” but without a doubt it is befitting the man he came to be.

The dissertation evolved to an acceptable level and passed the defense. It was well received and has been read by more than just the University doctoral committee. The fact that others outside those who were required to read my dissertation chose to read it, made me feel affirmed in the selection of my topic and the value of the study. Even so, the readership would be only a few. I fre-
 Frequently heard younger employees in the Dallas County Community College District respond to the mention of Bill Priest with, “You mean the Institute for Economic Development?” They didn’t know about the man who had given them a place to work.

The full dimension of Priest’s part in the development of the DCCCD was recorded in my dissertation. In fact, various aspects of the district had been the topic of several other dissertations. By their nature, dissertations are dry, redundant, and not widely read except by other researchers. To increase the readership and bring more public awareness to the contributions of Priest in the community college movement, a published book was needed. The recommendation of the publisher was a biography with more personal descriptions. Fortunately, Priest is a unique person, not the stereotypical college president of dark suits, white shirts, holed up in an office of heavy mahogany furniture, who comes forth only for special occasions to give academically astute sounding speeches. Priest lives life as a great adventure. He has an abiding passion for education. Above all, he is always himself in all settings. Priest, the man, would lend flavor to a book on Priest, the educator.

This book was written from many interviews with Priest, himself, and those who know him personally and professionally, and from early documents, published articles, and previous research. The bulk of the research was completed at the dissertation stage, but additional interviews and research were done to enliven the book with information inappropriate for a dissertation. There was a certain amount written from personal memories. I began working in the DCCCD in January 1977 and was present at many of the events discussed by others in their interviews and have watched the growth and changes from then until now. Documents, photographs, and the memories of the people who were there form the data for historical research. The critics of historical research cite it as being subjective and limited by the human perspective. Those elements are part of every discipline other than math or science, and there is some argument to support a certain amount of subjectivity even in those.
There are two levels of historical research. One is the recording of the facts, simply telling what happened. The second is the substance of what happened, the short and long range effects. History is more than a chronology of events. It is the influence on the people who lived it and their influence on the subsequent years. There is particular value in historical research in the field of education. It provides increased understanding on how the educational process has evolved to this point, which serves as a basis for further progress. Educators are entwined with the present and the past while trying to navigate through trends and fads in order to discern true strategic directions for the future. The study of the history of education assists those in the field to evaluate lasting contributions, and to distinguish them from momentary successes. With the retirement of long-time employees, each institution loses part of its unrecorded history. A biography draws deeply from both aspects of history, the recorded facts and the community of memories. This book focuses on the past of the comprehensive community college in higher education through the life of Bill Priest. With the graying of the campuses and the many numbers of faculty members, administrators, and staff queued for retirement, preserving this history in an accessible form is essential.