Bill Jason Priest, Community College Pioneer

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After returning stateside and to civilian life, Priest continued his studies full-time for his master’s degree at the University of California Berkeley. He completed it in May, 1946. Utilizing some of those graduate courses toward the doctorate and his master’s thesis, “Administration of Philippine Education Under the Commonwealth Government,” as the first chapter of his dissertation, “Philippine Education in Transition,” he earned his Ed. D. from Berkeley a year later, in May of 1947.

Priest’s war assignment had assisted in his collection of data and had given him the rare opportunity to research a subject for which no other North American academician would have the same knowledge base as he. Finding the time to write had not been a challenge. Priest had acquired a job teaching algebra and basic math at Mountain View, a high school in the Bay Area of northern California. The classes took little preparation for him and allowed him to work on his dissertation from three p.m. to eleven p.m. each weekday. Gaining approval for his dissertation to move to the next step of defense with the University’s committee was unusually simple. He took the document to his major professor who held it
in his hand, looked Priest in the eye and asked, “Is it a good dissertation?” Priest, sensing this was not a time for humility, replied, “It’s a hell of a good dissertation.” With a nod, the professor returned the dissertation to Priest and said simply, “It’s approved.” At the defense, however, an assistant professor of history tried to demonstrate his knowledge and perhaps his worthiness of a full professor’s position by challenging Priest’s data, but a senior professor took the assistant professor to task. The defense ended with handshakes for the new member into the community of scholars, Dr. Bill Jason Priest.

No dissertation reaches its final placement on the shelves of the graduate library without its author suffering some. After his dissertation had been defended, signed by the appropriate professors and deans, and delivered to the office of the dean of the College of Education, Priest was informed that he needed to write a five-hundred word abstract. He did so promptly and delivered it to the office of the dean. Soon afterwards on a spring morning while he was teaching math, Priest was called out of class to take a telephone call from the dean of the graduate division. Over the telephone, a secretary told Priest that he could not graduate because his abstract was over five-hundred words. With all the emotions of panic, disappointment, anger, and frustration raging at once, Priest left his job with a copy of the abstract and drove the sixty miles to Berkeley. When he arrived, the secretary was sitting at her desk. With the questioned abstract in hand, Priest told her he had carefully counted and recounted the words and each time found there to be no more than five-hundred. With a sigh she said, “I could have sworn it was over five-hundred words.”

Having been taken from his teaching assignment, run through an emotional wringer, and caused to drive an hour-and-a-half, based on a secretary’s miscalculation, Priest felt this must be dealt with. He asked to see the dean. He recounted the events, to which the dean responded with a comforting smile and the affirmation of an old sage, “Well, it’s O.K. now.” It was not the response Priest felt was appropriate, but certainly being allowed to graduate on schedule was the more important outcome.
Following graduation, Priest spent the next year as the Educational Advisor to the Navy Retraining Command. This quasi-school was part of the Navy’s penal system. Prisoners under General Court Martial who were deemed to be good prospects for rehabilitation were trained and made ready for a return to society.

In the fall of 1948, Priest assumed his first junior college administrative role in Costa Mesa, California, at Orange Coast College, which was opening on a remodeled Air Force base. California was the bellwether state in the two-year college movement and by 1948 boasted sixty-four such institutions of higher learning. Junior colleges were being established throughout the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, but the growth and acceptance was slow until World War II, when there was a wave of support for the returning soldiers. The colleges were struggling to take virtually all students regardless of preparation, and this open-door philosophy of admission, for which community colleges are now renowned, enticed a wide range of talent and abilities. The universities were not willing to enroll the under-prepared, and it was the fast changing junior college that was best equipped to respond to this need. In 1947, the United States President’s Commission on Higher Education published a report calling for an increase in the number of junior colleges and for the diversification of their offerings. This began the evolution of the junior college into the community college. The country needed a better trained work force for the growing industries, and greater access to higher education would encourage social equality. John Aubrey Douglas in his book, *The California Idea and American Higher Education*, said that the junior college was seemingly two institutions in one: a college serving as a stepping stone to the university, and a technical school that trained the labor force for emerging industries. This schizophrenia still characterizes the modern day community college. It is often the cause of internal conflicts within a single college. Priest was to fight that battle later in his career.

Serving as the dean and then later the assistant superintendent of Orange Coast College District, Priest worked for another of his “heroes” and mentors, Basil Peterson. Peterson had been a basket-
ball player, a Phi Beta Kappa, and a highly sought after godfather, having many godchildren. He was a professional and personal friend to Priest. Peterson gave Priest opportunities to do projects beyond the scope of his job as learning experiences. Peterson knew the value of being a generalist in higher education especially in leadership roles, where a breadth of understanding is necessary to make well grounded decisions. But once again, the religious example for Priest was that of a fundamentalist. Although Peterson was Mormon rather than First Christian, Priest saw in him a dedicated church participant like his grandfather. Peterson was straight-laced and inflexible, but he was intelligent and a superb educator and leader.

While at Orange Coast, Priest helped to precipitate one of the most significant changes in higher education, the movement of nurses’ training from the hospitals to colleges. S. H. Fondiller wrote, in a book published in 1983 by the National League of Nursing, that the movement of nursing education from privately controlled hospitals to the general education system and the development of the associate degree in nursing (ADN) was one of the most important developments in the history of education in this country. Priest was a part of that movement.

Again it was World War II that targeted the need for significant changes in higher education. It made the nation acutely aware of the shortage of nurses. Twenty-three percent of the hospitals in the United States were forced to close beds, wards and/or operating rooms. By 1951, the idea of total collegiate nursing education was growing. As early as 1949, the National League of Nursing Education (NLNE) was meeting with the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC, now American Association of Community Colleges or AACC) to discuss a nursing technician program. A large percentage of physicians and hospital administrators opposed nurses taking control of planning the type of education appropriate for their profession. They called it self-serving. At that time, about eighty diploma programs were offered in association with hospitals, but there were no separate college programs. At the national level, Edmund J. Gleazer, executive director of the AAJC,
was a primary participant in meetings with the NLNE. Ed Gleazer was involved at the national level through Kellogg Foundation Funding. Priest was working primarily at the state level in California which was spearheading the new concept, and later he served on national committees related to nursing.

In 1953, Priest was assistant superintendent of Orange Coast and remembered the uphill battle with the medical profession, “They thought we were trying to kill people and contaminate hospitals with heavy-handed nurses who didn’t know what they were doing. It almost seemed they’d sooner see people die from a shortage of BSN’s [Bachelor of Science in nursing] than to turn loose what they considered to be this horde of unwashed.” The meetings seemed endless with little progress being made due to the medical professionals “with their holier-than-thou” attitudes. Priest recalled, “You could present statistics; here’s the staffing, here’s the supply that the current training for nursing is providing. Look at this gap. How are you going to do it? Are you going to call people in off the street? That’s what you’re doing now. And they’d reply, ‘Yes, but they are under the guidance of a BSN.’ We’d point out that there wouldn’t be a BSN within shouting distance, and they’d promise to close that gap if we wouldn’t contaminate the profession. Well it got contaminated and now [the associate degree ] is accepted and produces the majority of bedside registered nurses in the nation.”

At Orange Coast, Priest offered one of the first pilot nursing programs in the country. It was successful and the growth in the associate degree in nursing programs was steady through the 1950s. There was an explosion in the 1960s and by 1964, 130 associate degree nursing programs were being offered and represented eleven percent of all registered nursing programs. In 1965, the National League for Nursing Education created a separate associate degree program component and called for separate accreditation. Again, Priest was ready at the helm and selected the first college of the Dallas Junior College District, El Centro, to be the first two-year college in Texas to offer an ADN program. That program produces over two-hundred graduates each year with an average of ninety-nine percent passing the National Nursing Boards.
While a large percentage of his time was spent on curriculum development and academic related issues, Priest was keenly aware that being an effective leader and educator took more than offering relevant courses. In the fall of 1954, he enrolled in post-doctoral study in community relations at Columbia University. This formal study helped to hone Priest’s natural marketing acumen. He was far ahead of his time in this area. Marketing and public relations were not acceptable concepts in higher education for most of its history. While Priest used his public relation skills in all of the colleges where he worked, it was in Dallas where he helped to make marketing a palatable word for educators. Wide acceptance has been slow and recent.

A key concept of good marketing is listening to your customers. Marketing was a very uncomfortable word for educators who inferred a limited connotation as “selling.” The members of the community are a college’s customers because they “buy” the courses the college offers. Not all are seeking advanced degrees or even vocational degrees. Many simply want information, knowledge, and training in a particular area. Priest was aware of the value of non credit courses and it was at Orange Coast he realized the real value of listening to the people served by that college. A woman came to Priest’s office asking for a course in goat husbandry. Priest listened, albeit with great skepticism. Believing in fact-based decision making, the college had a policy that it would offer any non credit course petitioned for with a minimum of fifteen signatures. He explained the policy to the woman who returned in a few days with a petition with more than the required fifteen signatures. The following semester he offered the course and sixty people enrolled. He then discovered they were the only college offering the course within a fifty-mile radius. Intermediate and advanced goat husbandry courses were added to the schedule of classes and met with equal success. Again utilizing excellent marketing, Priest reminded the reporters who showed interest in the phenomenal success of the goat husbandry courses that a university would have thrown the woman out and left all of those tax paying citizens without the courses they needed.
Priest’s reputation as an innovative, risk-taking but budgetarily sound leader in higher education was growing among his colleagues. His responsiveness to the constituents served by his college district, his community involvement, and his being a devoted family man who had been married for eighteen years with an eleven year old son, earned him the admiration of the community as well. In 1959, he was named “Man of the Year” in Fair Oaks, California. Every accolade that came his way was accepted with a dismissal as good fortune and good timing. His focus remained on quality instruction and the development of relevant courses whether purely academic, vocational, or not for college credit.

Non credit classes and credit classes often clashed in the battle for space with the non credit classes being given last choice. At Orange Coast College, the only space available for a popular millinery class was a biology lab. Through a series of events during a biology class, a tarantula escaped and was not found that day. The millinery instructor was left a note, “tarantula loose in classroom.” Fortunately the fierce looking little creature never made itself known in the totally female class. While a rather humorous demonstration of the space issues in junior colleges, the real battle, the so called schizophrenia of junior colleges, is the battle of pure academics versus vocational courses, even when they are both for credit.

Nowhere was that more of an issue than at American River College, which opened in Sacramento, California in 1955. Priest was hired as the Superintendent/President of the new college. He had the arduous task of not only beginning a new college, but also absorbing an existing college, Grant Technical College, into the new organizational structure. Grant Technical College had actually been the top two years of a kindergarten through fourteenth grade school in the local public school district. The faculty of the college levels, however, had tenure. That was the first hurdle. The new college being founded would not have tenure for the faculty. This was one of the first conflicts. The established faculty felt they should be grandfathered in the non-tenure for faculty policy. They sued and won. Now Priest was faced with a faculty in which some had tenure and some did not. Many of the former faculty of Grant Technical
College felt that none of the new rules should apply to them. This perpetual problem more than doubled the efforts of establishing a new college. There were continual lawsuits and the attorney was less than competent. He lost nine cases out of nine. Fortunately the Board of Trustees gave full support to Priest in the challenges he faced. In Priest’s estimation, they were a quality board with a focus on the educational good for students.

Not one to become mired down in the negativity of disputes and disagreements, Priest remained focused on the mission of the college and the quality of courses and services being offered to students. Marketing the concept he believed in was also at the forefront of his goals. With a mix of humor, a bit of ego, and a marketing goal, Priest adopted the bow tie as his trademark. His reasoning was that it was different from what other men were wearing. He said that when he spoke at an event or met with community leaders, or was simply introduced to someone at a gathering, they might not remember his name, but they would always remember “that guy with the bow tie.” His bow tie was as significant as the logo for American River College because he promoted the value of junior and community colleges wherever he went.

On the national level, during his tenure as the CEO of American River College, Priest was actively involved in growing the purpose and visibility of the American Association of Junior Colleges. The association was founded in 1920, but it was not far reaching or political. Initially the main focus was for these early educational pioneers to come together to define the junior college by creating standards for curriculum and determining the position of the junior college in relationship to other parts of the American education enterprise. The junior college had its roots in rural America, but the rapid expansion since World War II was taking the junior college movement into urban areas.

Among those college leaders was Edmund J. Gleazer, who later headed AAJC. At this time he was the president of Graceland College, a church-related junior college that had begun as a four-year institution. Graceland had consolidated its resources into a two-year institution on the advice of William Rainey Harper of the
University of Chicago, with assurances the university would take their graduates. With the involvement of Gleazer, Priest, and other junior college leaders of like mind, the AAJC broadened its purpose to educate the federal government to the value of this fast-growing aspect of higher education that was embraced by the American public. The Foundations that were beginning to offer grant opportunities in the areas of education seemed to overlook the junior colleges. It became a priority of the membership to send someone to Washington D.C. with the specific task of garnering more national visibility to the worth and potential of junior colleges. Priest was very supportive of a more aggressive role of AAJC and a presence in Washington. His support was critical because the California Junior College Association was big and powerful, but many of its members were skeptical about the need for a national association. Gleazer, who had served as president of the association, was selected to serve in the special task position to work with the AAJC head, Jesse P. Bogue in Washington. In 1958, Gleazer was elected executive director of AAJC to replace Bogue upon his retirement. Priest and Gleazer continued to work together as colleagues with a common goal. Gleazer said that Priest was well respected in the state of California and assisted him in arranging meetings with the junior college leadership in that state.6

Remaining in Sacramento, California, Priest was selected as superintendent of Los Rios Junior College District. The district was newly formed from two colleges, American River College, where he was serving as president, and Sacramento City College. This was not the melding of an established faculty with a new faculty, but the merger brought its own set of challenges. The new board consisted of members from each of the colleges. This created a four-to-three split vote on virtually everything, occasionally even the minutes from the last board meeting.

The second year as superintendent of Los Rios Junior College District, Priest was elected vice-president of AAJC. The following year he would be elected president of the association, an indication of historical protocol. The board might have been split in its support, but his colleagues across the country were unified in rec-
ognition of his accomplishments in the evolution of community colleges.

It was while at Los Rios that Priest pioneered another innovation in higher education, the telecourse. The husband of a former classmate of Priest was the president of the Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) station for the area. Television was still a relatively new medium and the PBS station had time to fill in its daytime programming schedule. The time was offered to the college. Realizing the potential of television to reach additional students who were not able to come to campus, Priest accepted the on-air time slot and offered a history course. It was purely experimental. Even in the early sixties, a high percentage of television programs were live. All local programming was live. The only production for the history course was a minimal classroom set in a bare studio with one camera. The live head-on shot format was fraught with problems that greatly cut into the quality, but the response from the public was good. Priest battled the State of California for reimbursement for those students who never came to campus. He could see the potential, but knew the format needed polishing. All of the possible problems that could exist for a single class on campus—the need for the instructor to be on time, well prepared, and contingencies in case the instructor was ill—existed for the televised class, with additional technical issues, and a wider impact on more students if something went wrong. On one occasion, the instructor arrived for the broadcast inebriated. The television station manager telephoned Priest and asked him what he should do about the situation. Priest replied that he could not remember the part of his graduate courses that explained how to handle the matter. The man’s condition was not discernable to the viewing audience and the class was broadcast as usual. Priest kept the idea of televised education alive and mentally filed for future use, with refinements. He would have such an opportunity in Dallas.

Dallas was one of the first twenty major cities to establish a junior college. This boom in the junior college movement occurred in the mid-sixties. In 1965 alone, fifty-two new two-year colleges opened. This wrought a bit of a crisis in the need for qualified
personnel to fill all of the new leadership positions. To address the issue, the American Association of Junior Colleges and the Kellogg Foundation initiated the development of junior and community college leadership graduate programs. AAJC and Kellogg brought into partnership ten of the larger universities in the country to offer doctoral programs. These programs were funded by grants from the Kellogg Foundation but each university developed its own curriculum and degree requirements. The University of Texas in Austin, under the direction of C. C. Colvert, was one of the ten. There were four higher education administrators selected by the Kellogg Foundation to monitor and evaluate the ten projects. Priest was one of the four and the only one from a two-year college district.

There was not only a need to provide educational preparation for college leaders, but also, a need to educate the many newly appointed/elected board of trustee members in the multifaceted aspects of the mission, organizational structure of junior and community colleges, and how to begin to plan. Based on that need, AAJC commissioned Priest to write an article on the selection of a college president. The article, titled simply “Selecting a College President,” was published in the American Association of Junior College Journal in the April issue of 1965. It became the first link between Priest and the Board of Trustees of Dallas County Junior College District.