There were early attempts at establishing the junior college in the Dallas area, but those built in the late 1800s did not survive. The junior college movement did not reach fruition in Dallas until the mid-1960s when two-year colleges were being opened nationally on the average of one per week. Efforts toward the establishment of a junior college for the Dallas area had been underway in one form or another for a decade. The delays hinged on two main issues: whether the college should serve just the city or the entire county, and whether it should be associated with a public school district or should be a separate entity.

The first aborted attempt began in 1956 when the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) appointed a Junior College Committee, and commissioned C. C. Colvert from the University of Texas to conduct a feasibility study. That study would include an indication of the interest on the part of the Dallas citizenry in having a junior college. In July of 1958, DISD superintendent, W. T. White withdrew the plans. There was concern that the establishment of a desegregated city college would have implications for public grades of kindergarten through the twelfth. The Dallas school district
was not integrated until the late sixties. It was an issue some educational leaders were not ready to address in the late fifties.

Dallas was not without a college. Southern Methodist University opened in 1915, but it was not founded with the intent of providing education to residents of the greater Dallas area. Priest described it at that point in time as “a regional sectarian institution, characterized by substantial tuition fees and a selective admissions policy.” This left a vacuum in higher education in Dallas County. Dallas residents who had transportation or could not afford to stay in the dormitories had to rely on perimeter state colleges in Denton, Arlington, and Commerce, or travel even farther and be forced to live at that college. The closest junior colleges were Kilgore and Tyler, each ninety or more miles from Dallas.

In 1960, the Dallas County Board of School Trustees and County Superintendent L. A. Roberts, became interested in a junior college to serve all of Dallas County. Colvert’s earlier study supported the need and receptivity of the residents for a county-wide college district. The board appointed a committee to conduct a study on the need for a Dallas County junior college. In March of 1962, Roberts wrote to the educational chair of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce indicating that he felt public interest would be necessary to make the college system a reality and that the study, “should be generated as promptly as is feasible.” As recorded in J. D. Williams’ unpublished dissertation at the University of Texas in 1968, Roberts further stated the board’s readiness “to cooperate with any conservative plan for the youth of junior college age in Dallas County.” This was a monumental statement in that it sparked the chain of events that resulted in the Dallas County Community College District. Roberts, however, was myopic in his view of the educational needs of Dallas County being limited to recent high school graduates. While the evolution of demographics has been slower for universities, junior colleges burgeoning in the post war years attracted and served a wide range of students of all ages. The same was true for Dallas.

While the study commissioned by the Dallas County Board of School Trustees was being conducted, both the Grand Prairie In-
dependent School District and the Richardson Independent School District were planning for junior colleges in each of their cities. Richardson had actually taken legal steps toward the establishment of a junior college, but the move was defeated at the polls October 27, 1962. Richardson voters were fearful of footing the bill for a facility that would serve an entire county. They were also concerned that the six existing four-year institutions within a fifty mile radius of Richardson would entice their local high school graduates from attending the junior college and it would lack adequate enrollment. The opening of Richland College just six years later would prove that to be an unwarranted fear.

In the spring of 1964, the still segregated Dallas Independent School District surveyed the parents of their students and found overwhelming support for a junior college. Armed with this data, the DISD board chair, Robert Gilmore, announced intentions to move forward with the building of an integrated junior college that would offer a variety of educational courses, but once again the issue of a city college versus a county college surfaced. The DISD served residents of the city of Dallas only. Its tax base was also drawn from the city and did not allow for support of a college that would serve the entire county. This would exclude the numerous growing suburbs of the city of Dallas. Superintendent White was not ready to admit defeat.

While the DISD controversy continued, the Dallas Chamber of Commerce was busy gathering twenty-two of the most successful and influential business people in Dallas as a steering committee to form a plan of action to establish a Dallas County junior college. The committee was headed by R. L. (Bob) Thornton, Jr., who later became the first chair of the board of the Dallas County Junior College District.

With the Dallas Chamber of Commerce firmly behind them, the steering committee wasted no time in accomplishing its assigned task. The development of an outstanding junior college system was listed as goal number five in The Goals for Dallas formulated by a diverse committee under the watchful eye of Mayor Erik Jonsson. In April of 1964, Thornton addressed the State Board of Educa-
tion requesting ratification of the proposal for establishing a junior college in Dallas County. The momentum was in place and just one year and one month later, the voters of Dallas passed a 41.5 million dollar bond issue with a two-to-one margin.\textsuperscript{12} That vote officially established the county-wide junior college system with a mandate from the people of Dallas County. In that same election on May 25, 1965, the voters also approved a property tax base for the junior college system of sixteen cents per one hundred dollars of appraised property value, and they elected seven unopposed board of trustee members.\textsuperscript{13}

Although the voters of Dallas elected the founding Board of Trustees, because they ran unopposed on the ballot, they were actually hand-picked from the most dedicated and capable of the civic leaders of Dallas. Selection had been made by a subcommittee of the original steering committee. The subcommittee was headed by Juvenile Court Judge Lewis Russell, who guided them through a selection process from a list of seventy names provided by Thornton.\textsuperscript{14} Those selected and then elected were Durwood Sutton, Carie Welch, Loncy Leake, Frank Altick, Margaret McDermott, Franklin Spafford, and Bob Thornton.

Each elected board member was a professional, a respected member of the community, and a civic leader. Thornton was the chairman of the board of the Mercantile Bank and the son of R. L. Thornton, Sr., known as “Mr. Dallas” for his leadership in developing the city. Spafford was an attorney and served as the lawyer for the Dallas Independent School District. McDermott, the only woman, was the wife of Eugene McDermott, the co-founder of Texas Instruments. McDermott was and still is one of Dallas’s foremost patrons of the arts. Altick was a medical doctor who owned and operated a clinic in north Dallas. Leake was a lawyer in private practice in Mesquite. Welch was the Mayor Pro Tem of Dallas and an insurance agent living in Oak Cliff. Sutton was the president of Grand Prairie State Bank. Every sector of Dallas was represented by these seven citizens.

After the successful election on May 25, the avidity of each of the new board members to bring to fruition this keenly needed
junior college created a synergy of immediacy for a single purpose. They held their first meeting six days later on May 31, 1965. An outline of duties was distributed and officers were elected. Thornton was elected president; McDermott, vice-president; and Spafford, secretary.\textsuperscript{15} They were well aware of the expansive task before them, but they were equally aware of the idealistic circumstances underlying that task. They were the prosopopoeia of the words of Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that can.”\textsuperscript{16} This board was positioned to bring monumental changes to the educational opportunities for the citizens of Dallas County, who then would affect far-reaching changes.

In an interview in July 1994, Margaret McDermott recounted, “There we were; seven people with the money we needed and none of us truly expert in designing a college. We used consultants; but from the very first, we wanted the very best.”\textsuperscript{17} As a self-acknowledgment of their own lack of experience in developing an institution of higher education, the board decided not to set any policies or write any by-laws until after consulting with experts in the field and after the hiring of a president. They did not want a new president shackled to prescribed tools of management. In that first meeting, Thornton had admonished the group that as trustees, every act and thought must be in the best interest of the junior college. The board began its search for guidance.\textsuperscript{18}

An obvious source of excellent advice was the American Association of Junior Colleges. Ed Gleazer was the executive president at the time. In November of 2002 he detailed that first meeting with Thornton. It was a late spring day when Thornton arrived at the AAJC Washington D.C. office without an appointment. The secretary informed Gleazer that a Mr. Bob Thornton from Dallas was in the office and would like to see him. Thornton entered the office with robust confidence and in his straight forward style said, “The voters in Dallas County have voted to authorize a junior college district, elected a board of seven trustees, and authorized a tax levy and power to issue bonds. We will have the best damn junior college in the country and we need a presi-
dent to do the job for us. Can you help us?” Gleazer was taken
aback for a moment. Then he noticed the recently published is-
sue of the *AAJC Journal* sitting on the corner of his desk. He rec-
ommended that Thornton read the featured article “Selecting a
College President” by Bill Priest. He assured him the article would
be helpful and then added that Thornton might want to take a
look at the author.¹⁹

Thornton and the other board members not only read the ar-
ticle, but also followed the prescription it gave for “making the
most important decision the board will ever make . . . for the
institution’s future will reflect the wisdom of the choice.”²⁰ The
article went on to warn, “With the rapid growth of the junior col-
lege movement, the importance of securing the best available tal-
ent for the key position of chief administrator cannot be
overemphasized.”²¹ This fit with the goal of the Dallas board to
hire the finest college administrator in the country.

Priest’s article called for identifying long-range goals for the
institution through the process of developing pertinent questions
related to what the board was looking for in a president. The ar-
ticle cited the following examples:

1. What are the major objectives of the college?
2. Are there peculiar local factors which will affect the type
   of person being sought?
3. Is the board seeking a man who will make a career as a
   chief administrator of the college, or do they want a
   special job done (i.e. a building program) by a person
   who has great ability in this particular field, but who
   may not be a generalist?
4. What role does the board expect the president to play
   in the administration of the college? Is the objective to
   obtain a president who will supply strong educational
   leadership to the college, including recommendations
   for future plans, or is it to employ a person to imple-
   ment plans which have already crystallized?²²

The questions were insightful and somewhat prophetic in that
the profile that emerged as the new board members fleshed out
answers was a profile well-fitted to the knowledge and experience of Priest.

The article also suggested developing formal criteria for the initial screening of candidates. The four general areas given were: academic training and credentials, experience, personal characteristics, and educational philosophy. Also, the article outlined a good method for developing a credible list of potential candidates. By drawing from junior college specialists from universities, and leaders from state and national junior college associations, a screening committee could be established whose members were well acquainted with top junior college professionals. The committee could recommend candidates to be interviewed for the position of president.23

Following the hiring model set forth in Priest’s article, the board sought the advice of C. C. Colvert of the University of Texas Department of Higher Education, and the one who had conducted the original feasibility study for a junior college in Dallas. They once again drew on the expertise of Gleazer. They asked for a list of about twenty outstanding junior college leaders from whom they could obtain criteria information and recommendations on possible candidates for the job. Both men gave similar lists of names. The Dallas board then invited this select group to Dallas for a few days of consulting with offers to pay their expenses and a small stipend. Nearly all indicated that they were happy to serve as a consultant, but they were not interested in the job. By the third or fourth interview, the value of the process became obvious. The board members began to assess the philosophies and backgrounds of the consultants as well as the men they were recommending. The list of final candidates included some of the consultants.24

Priest had been suggested by both Gleazer and Colvert to serve as a consultant. In talking with Priest about the establishment of criteria and the selection of a viable candidate, one of the board members asked Priest what he thought would be an appropriate salary for this new position. He indicated it would take thirty-five thousand dollars to bring someone to Dallas to take on this exciting challenge. In 1965, that sum rivaled the salary of the governor
of Texas. This answer proved to be an example of Priest’s unfaltering honesty, because some weeks later when he was offered the job and asked to name the amount it would take to lure him to Texas, Priest simply replied, “I told you when I was here before that I thought it would take thirty-five thousand dollars and I still think that would be a fair deal.” The board agreed.  

On August, 4, 1965, less than three months after the bond election, Priest was offered a five-year contract at thirty-five thousand dollars a year, making him the highest paid top official of any state institution in Texas, including the governor. Priest came to the job under the best conditions. He had been selected unanimously by the seven board members. There was adequate financing. He was to build a college from scratch with no mergers or pre-existing disharmony among staff. He could select his own staff. He could recommend policy to the board. There was an existing support from a friendly press. It was an ideal combination of circumstances.  

The support of the news media was affirmed immediately. Following the press release that indicated the thirty-five thousand dollars annual salary for Priest making him one of the highest paid junior college executives in the nation, the Dallas Morning News ran an article, “Poised for Success,” that never criticized the board for its commitment of taxpayer money at such a level. It fully complimented their choice stating, “Because success breeds success, the newly elected Board of Trustees succeeded in obtaining the services of Dr. Bill J. Priest, one of the top men in his field, who this year is first vice president of the National Association of Junior Colleges.”  

There was prevailing acceptance that the salary indicated a willingness on the part of the board to hire the very best in its quest to build a paramount community college system. Thornton underscored this idea when he publicly said, “The salary and the man are commensurate with the institution of highest excellence being planned for Dallas County.” There was no evidence that the news media or the citizens of Dallas ever disagreed with that philosophy. The article in the Dallas Morning News that ran the quote from Thornton justifying the top dollar salary, took no issue with the
amount. Instead, the reporter introduced the new president to his readers as “a nationally recognized junior college authority” and “a superior administrator and educator deeply admired by those in the forefront of the community college movement.”30 The article stressed that Priest had been the Dallas County Junior College board’s first and only choice for the job.

This unilateral backing by both the board and the local news media was contrary to the environment in which Priest had been working in Sacramento. The vote was consistently split for the Los Rios board members because each was loyal to one of the original two colleges that had been merged into one. Priest indicated that the only unanimous vote he ever received was the one releasing him from his contract to come to accept the Dallas job. He quipped, “My friends were happy for me and my enemies were glad to see me go.”31 The unanimous vote of the Dallas board for Priest was refreshing.

Priest was equally surprised and pleased to find the positive reporting of the local press. In California, the norm seemed to be for the news media to take an adversarial role with the administration of institutions of higher education. Even modest raises could create accusatory headlines. Priest remembered that his friend, the president of Yuba College in California, was given a raise from eighty-five-hundred-dollars to ten-thousand-dollars, and was greeted the following day with a front page photo and headline asking, “Is this man worth $10,000?” The newspaper article called for the ouster of the irresponsible board that made this decision. In sharp contrast, shortly after the announcement of Priest’s being hired at an annual salary of fourteen-thousand-dollars above the president of the University of Texas, an editorial appeared in one of the major daily newspapers in Dallas extolling the integrity of the Dallas County Junior College Board for being willing to spend the money to bring in the very best leadership for the new junior college system. Priest said he sent a copy of the Dallas editorial to his friend in California with a note, “You’re working in the wrong place. There seems to be a little difference in outlook.” Priest kept copies of both the California
front page article and the Dallas editorial beside each other for years, a reminder of his good lot.  

Priest did not take the solidarity of the board, the lucrative salary package, which also included a thirty-six-hundred-dollar annuity, and the overwhelming advocacy of the press and the community as a comfortable situation where one could feel secure. Instead, he viewed it as a seemingly insurmountable challenge of expectations of greatness. When he realized the unquestioning support was generated by the anticipation of the wonders to come and that he was the person expected to work that magic, he was humbled and intensely challenged. He described his feelings about the situation in a personal interview in 1994. “The thing that does to you, and I think this is obvious, is put you under incredible pressure. You want to perform miracles every hour on the hour if they put that kind of confidence in you. Your feeling is they deserve the best. We have got to deliver it some damn way. Whatever it is we have to figure it out because with this kind of support you ought to be able to be a paragon of virtue every minute. You can’t fight off critics by saying, ‘oh, to hell with them,’ and you get righteously indignant. But the only room in a deal like this is you feel terribly inadequate. You think, ‘I can’t possibly do what is expected of me,’ but you can try like hell.”

Priest not only tried, he succeeded. His humble self-effacing assessment of the situation was sincere and part of what kept him perpetually in high gear to rise to meet those expectations, and, of course, his own indomitable drive to achieve the best in all endeavors.

When first hired, Priest was constantly hearing and reading about his being the obvious best for the job. Thornton was quoted in Southwest Scene Magazine, a Sunday supplement to the Dallas Morning News, “Priest stood out head and shoulders above anyone we interviewed and when the decision was made, the trustees were convinced they had the best junior college administrator in the country.” He was pelted by accolades which set a high bar for him. It also piqued his curiosity about what the true decisive factor had been for the board in selecting him.

The six-hour interview had been held at the Lancers Club on the top floor of the building. Priest had been described as looking
like a cross between a prize fighter and Papa Bear, not presidential looking. On that occasion, he wore a checkered sport coat and his trademark bow tie. During the interview, one trustee had whispered to another, “Don’t look at him; just listen to him.”

Priest described the interview as a love-fest in that there had been immediate rapport. There had not been a litany of grueling questions. Instead, it had been more like a convivial conversation. He knew there had to have been something deeper that drove the final decision.

One day over lunch, after Priest had spent a period of time in the DCJC job, he asked board member Franklin Spafford, an attorney by profession, what it was that had brought the committee to the conclusion that he was the best professional for the job, and what had caused them to offer the job so quickly. Priest told Spafford he was aware of the quality candidates from across the country who the committee had interviewed and therefore, was surprised by the short amount of time between his interview and their extending the job offer to him. Priest confessed that he had hoped Spafford’s reply would give some insight into the answers he had given that day and that he might discover what had distinguished him from the others.

Spafford responded to the forthright questions with complete honesty. The interview had begun at six p.m., the cocktail hour, and so everyone had ordered drinks. Spafford reminded Priest that each of the twenty-two committee members ordered a fine wine or a mixed drink, some with special requirements. Priest ordered last. At the end of all those precise and sophisticated orders, he said, “If it’s all right with you, I think I’ll have a beer.” Spafford explained that with that order they knew Priest was a man of the people and that he was honest and a risk taker. Spafford went on to say that some of the other candidates had ordered drinks with great specificity, sometimes to the point of giving a recipe for the drink with instructions for the bartender on how to mix it. The committee had agreed that extreme efforts to impress a level of sophistication was very telling and did not leave a positive impression. Priest was completely without pretensions and at ease with who he was.
Although the answer was somewhat deflating to his ego, Priest indicated he loves to tell the story when he is presenting to high level professionals on the art of interviewing. A guileless drink order won him what he calls the best job of his career. While his genuineness set him apart in the interview, his steadfast honesty and integrity were only a few of the characteristics that earned him a place at the table.

The trustees held a press conference following the Dallas County Junior College board meeting where they formally approved the recommendation of the Committee of the Whole. At that conference, Priest gave a prepared response in which he delivered all the appropriate amenities, extolled the junior college as a concept, made a promise of educational service to the people of Dallas County, and proffered a prediction of national prominence for the Dallas County Junior College District. The speech follows.

I wish to express to the people of Dallas County and to the Board of Trustees of its Junior College District my appreciation for the very great honor of being invited to serve as first chief administrator of your junior college district.

Texas will be a new experience for me, and I anticipate that it will be a challenging and satisfying one. Your state is known for the high quality of performance that is demanded of its leaders and public servants. Your trustees have communicated to me this expectation of excellence. I concur completely with this quest for quality and shall concentrate on obtaining it.

Nowhere in the field of education is there more dynamism than in the junior college field. The relatively recent ascendancy of the junior college in American higher education may be attributed to its demonstrated capacity to solve or alleviate some of our most complex contemporary problems—political, social, and economic. Residents of the Dallas area may anticipate that a strong junior college program will provide a comprehensive array of vocational and
professional opportunities for them and their successor generation.

With the public support for junior college education, which is very evident in Dallas, I have every confidence that we will be able to build the Dallas County Junior College District into one of the finest in the nation.37

During the next fifteen years the promise and the prediction were fulfilled, but as Priest had noted, Texas was a new experience for him. He knew Texas culture by reputation only. He had never lived in any part of the Bible belt before. It was an anomaly to him that as a routine part of the get acquainted conversation came the question, “What church do you go to?” He soon discovered that agnosticism was equated with atheism in the Dallas area. In his mind, agnostic meant he believed in a supreme being and that the universe was far too complicated a creation for there not to be a God over all. His negative experiences with fanaticism and those taking advantage of others in the name of organized religion caused him to disassociate with formal denominations that seemingly gave human characteristics to God. This explanation was far too complex to explore in casual chit chat. Since he had been reared in the home of his grandfather, an elder in the First Christian Church, Priest had attended those services with him. Based on that history, First Christian became his answer. He lived his life and conducted his business with the moral standards and ethics of Christian teachings. The response was a great simplification of the whole truth, but it avoided the lengthy discourse on whether there was unassailable evidence of the correctness of this or that tenet of one religion or another. Once he was an established member of his personal and professional communities, the question dropped from conversation. His character and life spoke to the issue.38