Selecting a president was only the first of many tasks facing the newly elected Board of Trustees of the Dallas County Junior College District. At the top of the list was securing a site for the campuses. They chose to wait to involve whoever the president was to be in the land acquisition and planning process. Once Priest had accepted the job, he became the quarterback for the site selections and the planning process for building the seven-college district.¹

Many factors had led to the decision to establish a multi-college district. The original study for Dallas done by C. C. Colvert had recommended four campuses of forty acres each. The Board of Trustees, however, believed that Dallas never planned big enough and after in-depth studies, they decided to build six campuses with at least two-hundred acres each in outlying areas around the central downtown campus.²

There are many issues and concerns associated with a multi-college district, like the debate in 1991 with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as whether to accredit each college separately or as a single district. The decision was to continue
to accredit each college individually. There are fewer issues with a district comprised of several colleges than with a single college having multiple campuses. In 1965 when that decision was made for Dallas, there were just under twenty multi-college districts in the country. By 1968, that number had grown to forty. Most were established in or close to densely populated areas like Dallas. This growth of junior colleges away from its rural roots to urban areas was attributable to the shift of the population. Rapid changes in technology were calling for education to become more functional in order to answer the needs of the workforce. Addressing the needs of business and industry was the one of the primary missions of the junior college.

Setting up the Dallas system as a multi-college district rather than a multi-campus college would allow each college to reflect the community it served and for each community to feel ownership in its respective college. There has been growth in multi-college districts nationally, but Dallas remains the only one in the south, with the exception of Alamo Community College. Alamo began as a multi-campus college, but then acquired Saint Phillips which was already a free standing institution and needed to retain its identity as a college. Even nationally, most multi-college districts evolved from a single college or small multi-campus colleges, but Dallas began with a specific plan and adequate financing to establish a multi-college district within a short time frame. With most districts, growth required planning differently within an existing system, but the Dallas system began as a whole. The more sites a system has, and the more widespread those locations are, the greater the necessity for separate colleges. Priest’s positions in California as president of a new college that absorbed an existing college and then president of a college created by merging two colleges, gave him an experience base for knowing the value of planning a unified system from the beginning.

The separateness of colleges within a district is an organizational structure with less central control than the multi-campus college. This system by design seemed diametrically opposed to the perception of some faculty and administrators in
California, and later in Dallas, that Priest needed absolute control. This perception, like the one of Priest being an autocrat, was not entirely unwarranted. They both related to his awareness of having the ultimate responsibility for all that happened within the college district during his watch. He concurred with those who said there was no autonomy of the colleges even though they were established as separate institutions. Priest was very clear in his definition of autonomy and its existence in any organization. When directly asked about the self-rule of the colleges in an interview in 1994, he replied, “The original answer I gave several years ago to the two division deans that autonomy does not exist is still my answer. Why get into a philosophical discussion about how many angels can fit on a pin head? People who ask a question about autonomy are really asking, ‘Will you leave us alone and let us do what we want without your interference?’ Hell, no! As soon as I see you’re doing it wrong, I’ll make you stop. I’m obviously not going to be present in most cases because I am going to have competent people and they are not going to have autonomy because they have a letter that says they have autonomy. They’re going to have autonomy because they are doing a damn good job, doing it right, and no intervention is necessary or desirable. It would reduce its effectiveness if you got involved. That is real autonomy.”

Priest’s definition of autonomy as a competent person doing an excellent job so that no central control was necessary coincided with his belief in the true spirit of individual colleges that reflect their unique communities. As a quantitative representation of that belief, the district office, housed in a central but separate location, had fewer employees and functions during Priest’s chancellorship than any time since.

Priest felt at the time the district was established that in a large county like Dallas, the communities to be served by the colleges were substantially different and could not have their needs met with a cookie cutter answer. Operating on the premise of unity with diversity, he believed that the local community should know about the college that served it and the people who worked at that
college. It was unimportant for the public to know there was a district chancellor and a downtown office.¹⁰

The concept of the district office as a holding company overseeing the distribution of educational services allowed each college to be more responsive to the unique needs of each community. Priest also foresaw a better and more valuable accrediting processes if each college was accountable for its own quality. His thought was the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) would then have to write specific reports on each college rather than a sweeping overview of the district. This would give each college direct data for improvements without assuming that the SACS Visiting Committee’s comments were recommendations for one of the other colleges.

Another advantage of the multi-college structure was that the district became a buffer for the colleges. At the top of a multi-college district, the president or chancellor has four distinct publics to whom he or she must respond: the colleges, the community at-large, the Board of Trustees, and the state. That top position absorbs the responsibility for interaction with the board and the state, freeing the presidents of the colleges to concentrate on their specific communities and colleges. Priest was keenly aware of the importance of responding efficiently and appropriately to all four, never forsaking one to focus sole attention on another.¹¹

Priest admitted that overseeing one college was more enjoyable because it allowed for greater involvement with people, but when he came to Dallas the need was great. There was, as he described it, “a major backlog of demand for the types of services a community college can render,” so the decision was made to begin with a “massive attack on the problem” by establishing a seven college district to serve the great diversity of needs of Dallas County.¹²

That “massive attack” was a twelve-year task, but several factors in that plan set national standards which were replicated or used as measures for the successful development of other college districts. The DCCCD Master Plan was a comprehensive approach with detailed planning of the entire district’s layout before any constructions was begun. From the first phase, all seven colleges
were named and a timetable established for construction, including the need for a second bond election in 1972.\textsuperscript{13}

Putting seven colleges into operation in twelve years was an achievement noted nationally. In California in the \textit{Bakersfield Scene} newspaper in July of 1976, reporter D. Clemmons wrote, “This is a record unparalleled for a single district in the history of the community college movement regardless of the size of the district.”\textsuperscript{14} The celerity of the process was only one of the benchmarks achieved by the Dallas board and Priest in building the district’s physical plant. Other distinguishing achievements were location and size of each of the properties, parking space philosophy, innovative use of form, and overall aesthetics of the interior and exterior designs.

In October of 1965, the board indicated to Priest that they expected the first college of the district to be opened in September of 1966. Priest hired Deon Holt from the Los Rios College District in California as the director of research and planning to spearhead the implementation of building plans. That allowed only ten months to plan it, build it, set the curriculum, staff it, and open it. It was decided that the renovation of an existing facility might be the most efficient route and that since there would be just one college initially, it should be located in a central area accessible to students from all over Dallas County.\textsuperscript{15}

After considering six locations, the site search was narrowed to two: Union Depot and the former Sanger-Harris Department Store complex. The depot offered the advantage of an adjacent parking lot, but the purchase would have to be negotiated through several railroad corporations which could have been a lengthy process. That swung the decision to the former Sanger-Harris complex. The district purchased the site from O. L. Nelms for $2,150,000.\textsuperscript{16} The original structure and its extensions were built in the late 1800s by Philip, Elias, Ale, Lehman, Isaac, and Baum Sanger, merchants whose family had immigrated to American from Germany in the 1850s.\textsuperscript{17} The store was originally called Sanger Brothers before it purchased and merged with A. Harris department stores. This background of the facility would later give rise to questions of its
historical value. Those questions would cost the district time and money for years to come.

With a building selected to house the flagship college of the Dallas district, the task of pulling together all of the things that makes a building a college demanded immediate attention. There had to be a well defined mission and the services and courses to accomplish that mission. In the mid-sixties, the Texas two-year college system was primitive. All of them were junior colleges and operating exactly as that, a junior representation of the senior colleges. They offered the freshman and sophomore years of a four-year degree, had dormitories, and full-blown athletic programs complete with drill teams and cheerleaders. The junior college had a valuable place in higher education, but it was limiting in who it served. Its targeted population was the recent high school graduate seeking a bachelor’s degree.¹⁸

Priest introduced the elements to Dallas that created a comprehensive community college even though the name did not initially reflect that concept. He influenced the board to reject the establishment of a scholarship sports program because it would drain the resources needed for instruction. Priest also brought the concept of emphasizing technical and vocational programs in the curriculum as opposed to relegating these courses to what was commonly called trade schools.¹⁹ This allowed a student to complete a degree or certificate at the two-year college and graduate prepared to enter the work force. Throughout the country, there had been resistance to the inclusion of vocational programs in the junior college offerings. The fear was this would reinforce the class system that had arisen during the industrialization of America by categorizing students as professionals or laborers.²⁰

Priest’s philosophy and goals for students were on the opposite end of the spectrum from that fear. He stalwartly promoted the dignity of a two-year program and chided the American view that there was some kind of magic in holding a bachelor’s degree. On the practical side, he pointed out the economy could not absorb that many people with that level of training. In Priest’s words, “The two-year program is designed to prepare people to go out and take
their place in civic and family matters,” while earning a good income.

21 In fact, time would show that the community college would open the door to higher education for people who were not prepared or confident enough to seek a bachelor’s degree.

There was no elitism in Priest’s view of the mission of the community college. He saw the transfer degree to a bachelor’s degree and the technical/vocational degree as having equal value, each with a vital place in the economy. This philosophy was represented in the physical structure of each of the seven colleges in Dallas. Many states had and still have two-year college systems that housed academic transfer and vocational programs on separate campuses. The DCCCD did not house them in separate buildings unless the size or noise level of equipment necessitated it, such as automotive technology. Priest called the juxtaposition of the academic and technical programs “an attack on social stratification because people working together understand each other.”

This same lack of elitism embraced the need for remedial courses. The Dallas colleges would operate with an open door admission policy. The policy stated that anyone over the age of eighteen whose high school class had already graduated would be accepted for college admission. This allowed the enrollment of under-prepared students. To help these students to be successful, the curriculum included various levels of pre-college courses in math, reading, and writing. Even though SAT and ACT courses were not required for entrance into the college, they were collected and assessed to see if the student needed additional testing for their level of preparedness. Priest viewed the community college as a people’s college meaning that not every student would arrive fully prepared to tackle a college level curriculum and that remedial courses, called guided studies, were needed to bridge this educational gap. Priest’s advocacy for remedial courses at the college level was an indication of his understanding of the non-traditional student that would be a major portion of the students served by community colleges. In a newspaper article published in May, 1966, before El Centro was scheduled to open that fall, Priest explained, “A mature person who missed out on a high school
diploma may have the capability of a college education. Through what we call our guided studies program, such students will be able to take remedial courses—English and math for example—to help fill their gaps.  

Priest also brought to Texas the concept of non credit courses, then called community service courses, for non degree seeking students. Most of the courses were less than a semester in length and ranged from social skills, like ballroom dancing, to more practical courses, like Spanish for business and travel, and numerous courses offering an update of technical skills.

With the curriculum philosophy in place, they needed to select the degree programs to be offered at El Centro. Just as site selection had been driven by the economy of time and the accessibility to the entire county, curriculum choices were subject to the constraints of the size of space and the fact it was a multi-story building located downtown. Another consideration was county-wide needs of industry and business. Although there were needs for manufacturing related jobs like welding and auto body repair, the downtown high-rise building did not lend itself to the laboratory requirements for such programs.

Al Phillips, newly hired vice president of instruction, and Priest met with area employers to research and identify the areas of greatest need for program development. With all the limitations of space and city ordinances taken into consideration, thirteen programs were designed to target four main industries: data processing, health, fashion, and food preparation. The vocational programs required core academic courses in mathematics, reading, and writing. These core courses also were part of the transfer curriculum for those students who would later pursue a bachelor’s degree.

With the identification of the areas for vocational degrees, one being health, El Centro became the first community college in Texas to offer an associate degree in nursing. Priest had fought the battle in California and adding the program to the downtown allied health programs was a natural. Its success was immediate and continued to grow. With a grant from the Division of Nursing of the U.S. Public
Health Service, the ADN curriculum was tailored to meet the needs of veterans with medical training, but who lacked certification from state agencies. The program granted credits based on competency tests and offered seminars in the differences in the practice of military and civilian medicine. The addition of the med-vet program garnered El Centro’s ADN program a note in the Congressional Record in 1972. Senator John Tower remarked, “I commend El Centro College and the very capable leadership of Dr. Bill J. Priest, chancellor, and Dr. Robert Leo, director of social projects for this exciting innovation in the education of veterans and allied health personnel.”26

A student entering El Centro had thirteen vocational careers and a generic transfer degree from which to choose. The excellent curriculum contained courses to support those who entered the open door but were not ready for college level course work. Students had decisions to make and test scores had to be interpreted about levels of readiness for college courses. It was clear to Priest, students would need guidance in these decisions.

In the mid-sixties, the junior colleges in Texas did not have established counseling centers or even formal faculty advising systems. Priest included counseling as part of the master plan for all seven colleges. He ensured that each college provided this service on a greater scale than had ever been offered before in a community college.27 A desire for student success was the motivation for Priest’s support of counseling. He wanted each student to leave the community college with a clear direction for their life and the skills to achieve that goal. Publicly and repeatedly Priest voiced his concern that too many students enrolled in the academic transfer program to pursue a bachelor’s degree and then they were not able to find meaningful employment, while there were ample good paying jobs in technical fields for well trained skilled people. In an article, “On the Threshold of Greatness,” published in the September, 1966, issue of the Junior College Journal, Priest blamed society’s glorification of a select few professions for setting unrealistic standards of achievement for many students. He wrote, “It is easy to give lip service to the person who is not going to be a
brain surgeon or nuclear physicist, but when all is said and done, the focal point of attention all too often seems to be on those professions which are high in status." The need, however, was for approximately seven technicians or paraprofessionals for every professional. But society began planting the idea in young minds at the elementary school level that only professional jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree or more were appropriate goals.

Herein lay the value of counseling; it could offset limited and often inappropriate goals. Initially, the counselor would assist the student in finding a suitable level of study through assessment of current skills. Using evaluations through career interest instruments and discussions, a counselor could guide a student toward a major where there was viable employment, and that would be in line with their aptitude and interests.

The first dean of students at El Centro College, Don Creamer, was impressed with Priest’s strong advocacy for counseling as an essential element in the educational process. Creamer recalled the words of Priest in a faculty meeting after it was rumored that there had been complaints about counseling, “Any faculty member who bad mouths counseling is committing a sin worse than ax murder. If I ever learn that a faculty member is bad mouthing counseling, I personally will fire him.” Creamer indicated that Priest’s powerful support of the counseling function did not stop with words. He made funds available in the budget to hire necessary staff based on Creamer’s judgment.

El Centro employed the largest number of certified counselors of any higher education institution in Dallas County or any two-year college in Texas. In fact, the entire student services area had a higher staff to student ratio than most colleges in the country. The first president of El Centro, Don Rippey, concurred that the services of the Learning Resource Center and counseling were of the highest priority. Funding was provided from the general budget with additional dollars from the state for technical and vocational counselors. Priest believed that since students generated part of the revenue through tuition, and purchases in the bookstore and cafeteria, that they should share in the profits. Food service and
the bookstore were lease services, with contracts written so that a percent of sales went into funds allocated for student services. Both of those operations reported to the dean of students.\textsuperscript{32}

Though his belief in the service was strong, so was his expectation for excellent outcomes in retention and completion rates. These statistics theoretically demonstrated students had been advised into the appropriate levels of courses. Priest set high standards of accountability in every aspect of services and instruction.

These high standards included his creating an environment for innovation and expansion. He was a risk taker and wanted college staff to be risk takers too. Creamer remembered it as almost a demand for innovation and so they tried things that were successful and some things that were not. Eventually the innovations expanded student services to the broader concept of student development. The founding administrators of El Centro established a self-assessment laboratory for initial academic advising. The self-assessment was part of the initial intake process and assisted in directing students into college level or pre-college level courses.\textsuperscript{33}

Another unique approach to improving student success was the alignment of counseling concepts with academic content which formulated the first human development courses.\textsuperscript{34} Priest was supportive of the new approach to counseling through an instructional format. The human development curriculum was created to deal with the student as a whole person. Most students do not arrive at a community college free of any concern, full of confidence and highly motivated to learn. Priest had spoken to this issue many times. The El Centro student services staff responded with the creative solution of courses that developed the person, and were not limited to providing a knowledge base in a specific area of study. In an interview in 1994, Creamer explained these courses as a “response to the multiple conditions people brought with them to college that handicapped their ability to make the most of their learning opportunities.”\textsuperscript{35} These human development courses embodied Priest’s educational philosophy of teaching the whole student. He stated the mission of the community college, “is to use our resources to help a person be better than
they are and get as close as they can to where they want to go, and also to hold up aspirations so they have a better consciousness of what their options are. . . . It is obvious that education does not mean learning work or learning intelligent living; rather learning an intelligent plan of life that includes work, fulfillment, and realization.”

This philosophy reflected through the innovations in student services, as well as the overall organization and operation, brought national attention to El Centro College and the burgeoning Dallas County Community College District. There was a steady stream of visitors from all over the country. They came, not only from two-year colleges, but also from the universities. A university in Bakersfield, California heard about the downtown campus and its new and innovative approaches. They sent a contingent to study the utilization of a downtown campus. The newly forming Dallas system was creating national trends in student services, many of which are found as established modes of practice today.

Public acclaim spotlighted the new college on a national level. The U.S. Office of Education issued a report in 1969 lauding El Centro as potentially “the most successful urban college in the nation.” The Office of Education’s evaluation team enumerated the college’s strengths as a stimulating learning environment, close student and faculty contact, the visionary leadership of Bill Priest, and the generous commitment of resources from Dallas constituents. The report was made public in an article in Southwest Scene Magazine in the Dallas Morning News in 1971.

The value of the entrance and enrollment process established by El Centro and subsequently used by all of the Dallas County colleges was recognized statewide in 1987. Priest had been retired for six years when the Texas State Legislature appointed an education review committee. The focus was on kindergarten though twelfth grade, but the findings had implications for higher education. The committee’s report indicated a large percentage of high school graduates were not prepared for freshman college level courses. Most of the institutions of higher education did not have assessment tools in place with remedial courses available for
those who did not test at college level readiness in reading, writing, and math. In the fall of 1989, the state implemented Texas Assessment Skills Program (TASP.) An assessment of those three basic skill areas already was being used by the colleges of the DCCCD. Students not passing TASP or a portion of it were required to take remedial courses in the subject area(s) failed.

TASP was a Texas State requirement until August 2003. Through the years, the state allowed a variety of exceptions to TASP testing for colleges with a proven assessment test and successful placement of first-time-in-college students. The Higher Education Coordinating Board and Texas State Legislature’s call for the need of a statewide assessment of basic skills for all entering freshmen, supported by remedial courses, validated what the DCCCD had been doing from its beginning in 1966.

The additional services and courses offered by El Centro and each DCCCD college as it opened, required additional staff. In the area of staffing, as with everything else, a premium was placed on excellence. The stress on hiring the best possible faculty, administrators, and staff was not a philosophy imposed on Priest by the Dallas Junior College Board of Trustees. It was a value by which he had always executed that part of his administrative duties. He knew that quality personnel was essential to running a quality institution of higher learning. Had the Dallas Board of Trustees not shared that belief, and supported it with an adequate budget, Priest would not have accepted the position. In an article in the *Sacramento Union* while Priest was president of American River College, he was asked about the importance of hiring the right personnel. Priest replied, “Pull out the stops in assembling a good faculty. Faculty is the lifeblood of your college. Unusually able people will attract other able people. Mediocre personnel will earmark your operation as mediocre, and it will be difficult or impossible to undo the initial faux pas.”

Bob Thornton had assured Priest that conserving money was not the objective in hiring decisions. In an interview in 1975, Thornton recalled what he had said to Priest, “We cannot ask you to come here and to create a brand new something and then tie your hands as to the tools you
can use, and the tools are going to be your lieutenants. . . . Pay what it takes to get what you want.”

That set the confirmed goal of hiring the “top grade” instructors and administrators.

Priest officially took the helm as president of the Dallas County Junior College District in October of 1965 and he immediately made his first three personnel recommendations: Alfred M. Phillips, for vice president of instruction; Frank P. Schroeter, for special assistant for planning and research; and Carol Zion, as associate dean of instruction. Phillips came from Moses Lake College in Washington. Schroeter was from the Office of School Planning in Minnesota, and Zion came from Miami Dade Community College in Florida. All three were approved at the November board meeting.

The selection of the person for the top position of El Centro was as important as those who would make district-wide decisions. The criteria was clear-cut. They needed someone who had top level experience in a two-year college and a good track record. The person would need to be able to do an excellent job efficiently, be able to readily recognize problems, and know what to do to remedy them. The job was a very good opportunity and if it were opened to a national search, they were assured of getting a high number of applicants, some of whom would be able to take on the task at hand. Time was of the essence and the feeling was that collectively this new administrative staff had the network and the wherewithal to assess and hire quickly.

Phillips recommended a colleague from Washington, Don Rippey, who was the president of Pasco Junior College at the time. They brought him in for an interview. He had opened a college, was articulate, and was serious about quality education. Priest extended the offer and Rippey agreed to be in Dallas and ready to work in thirty days.

In the all-out effort to open El Centro College by August, 1966, personnel appointments were approved at virtually every board meeting. While an incredibly short time line was a driving factor, the board never questioned Priest’s recommendations. There was unified trust in his ability. According to Margaret McDermott, the feeling was that Priest had “a real knack for selecting the right
person.” That sense of his skill to read people would prove to be right repeatedly through the years as he selected people from unlikely backgrounds for jobs he believed they could do. One of the first was the hiring of Deon Holt, a journalist, to plan and oversee the building of the campuses.

Priest’s hiring skills were not limited to selecting the right people. He was also very good at recruitment. Priest set up interview sessions in various parts of the country, scheduling several interview times and dates per each location. He chose to go to cold snowy areas during the peak of winter. He had a carousel slide show for them to watch while candidates were sitting in an outer room waiting for an interview. The slides were of sunny lake shores, boating, golf courses, and all things warm and wonderful in Texas. The choices were then his because the candidates were already sold on the move.45

Quality checks must go beyond the initial hiring process. Paying well for master teachers and the best administrators implies an expectation of high performance. Priest instigated continuous quality controls from evaluation of all personnel to involving faculty in the decision-making process for shared governance and a system of checks and balance.46

The structure established for faculty gave no rank. All faculty members were peers with one title of instructor rather than a hierarchy of titles. The salary structure for faculty was based on the number of years of experience and degrees earned, but no college titles came with that variance. There was no tenure. A three-year contract was the longest time of assured employment and was part of the evaluation process.47 Gayle Weaver, the first faculty association president, said faculty members preferred the three-year contract to the initial proposal of a five-year contract. It permitted a division dean to deal with a poor performer by allowing the contract to wind down without offer of another. At the end of each year, the dean could review and discuss areas of needed improvement that must be accomplished to earn another three-year contract. A good review gave an instructor a new three-year contract at the end of each year. The stepping down to the end of a three-year contract
was instigated only when an instructor had breached professional ethics and needed to improve in order to continue employment in the DCCCD. It was also a form of protection for the instructor. A dean could not dismiss a faculty member based on one year’s poor evaluation.\textsuperscript{48}

That system of evaluation for instructors involved evaluation forms filled out by students, classroom visits by the division dean, and a set of criteria developed by the faculty association. Priest was emphatic about the quality of teaching being measurable without infringement on academic freedom. C. Parsons quoted Priest in an article in 1966 in the \textit{Christian Science Monitor} on the definition of teaching. Priest said, “Teaching is too important to be exempted from measurement. Any admission that we can’t tell good teaching from bad teaching is an admission that we’re hopelessly confused.”\textsuperscript{49} He was also one of the strongest advocates of faculty rights.

When Priest came to Dallas, he established the first faculty association for a community college in the state of Texas.\textsuperscript{50} Although there was not an official school of management at that time, called total quality management, Priest was a forerunner of that philosophy. He sought input and encouraged decisions to be made at the lowest level “by the doer,” predicated on the belief it was better to have an administrative request for faculty to form an association than to wait for an issue that would rally the faculty into an association.\textsuperscript{51} Priest set forth the charge to the El Centro College faculty to form an association. He believed that faculty input was essential in all areas related to academics. He also believed the faculty association president should have direct access to the top person in the college, which in this case was him. He called it “dependent pragmatism” in that any complaint or criticism from faculty association officers was worthy of investigation even if they were reported to be perpetual complainers.\textsuperscript{52} Reflecting back over the years at the time of his retirement in 1981, Priest said even those occasional association officers who were not constructive in their leadership approach kept the organization vital and moving.

Priest’s sincere advocacy for faculty was proven early on. One of the first efforts on the part of the newly formed faculty association
was to present Priest with a salary proposal. He promptly told them it was not high enough and sent them away to write another. Gayle Weaver, association president at the time, recalled, “Priest beat the hell out of our proposal asking for a four-hundred-dollar a year raise. He said our data were out of date and inaccurate. Then he reached in a file and pulled out more current information, and handed it to us. He charged us with writing a new proposal and encouraged us to ask for eight-hundred-dollars a year.” 53 The motivation behind that response was Priest’s desire to continue to try to recruit the best teachers for the rapidly growing district. In order to do that, he wanted the salaries to be more competitive. He also wanted the salaries to be a factor in drawing skilled staff until the new Dallas system had time to develop a reputation that would be the enticement. Indeed, the salaries and the reputation of the DCCCD being a quality place to work did attract top instructors. The year before Priest retired, the Dallas County Community College District boasted well over one-third of its academic faculty held a Ph.D., compared to the national average of one-fifth.54

While the benefits designed for administrators did not include the same protections of an association or a three-year contract as provided to faculty, it was an attractive package. Again, he built on a philosophy he had formulated and publicly spoken about in previous leadership positions. In a 1962 article published in the *Junior College Journal*, Priest advised new presidents to set-up organizations with “clear-cut job specifications, unambiguous echelon relationships, and well-defined guiding principles and regulations.” 55 The district office provided generic job descriptions for each administrative position that could be adapted to the needs of each college. There was a good salary schedule, unparalleled opportunity for upward mobility, and a generous sick-leave and vacation policy. Priest realized the stresses of a twelve month a year job that often demanded more than the usual forty hours of work in a week would require adequate time for vacation and renewal. Administrators earned enough vacation to enable them to take one week every three months if that is how they chose to use it.
This was not a simple perk, but a sincere belief Priest had in the need for professional rejuvenation. All of his principles of management were evidenced during his tenure as president of the American Association of Junior Colleges’ board. He was elected to the role in 1966 and while working feverishly to open a new college and inaugurate a college district, Priest gave substantial attention to AAJC. Ed Gleazer, who was the executive director at the time remembers Priest as “a productive partner.” Priest directed the AAJC in drafting personnel policies and salary schedules for staff, and worked to improve the position of the executive director’s position. He worked with the board to raise the position’s salary to a level comparable to a community college president of a metropolitan institution. He also initiated approval of a leave of absence for the executive director every three years for a period of two months that could be added to the annual one month vacation. It would not only allow a time for renewal, but also the opportunity to pursue other projects of personal or professional growth.

There is considerable evidence that Priest respected those who worked for him as people who had lives outside work, and who would benefit in time away from work. His detractors sometimes painted a picture of a myopic work-focused, rule-enforcing Captain Bligh, but the words of most of those who worked for him and his actions counter that description.

In his capacity as President of AAJC, Priest worked diligently to bring all junior colleges to the table to work together. In his keynote address the AAJC national convention Priest called for the forming of an “Academy of Junior College Education.” This was not in conflict with the functions of the association. AAJC was the national lobbying arm of the two-year colleges fighting for their fair share of federal support through bills and funding. The academy envisioned by Priest would provide a clearing house for sharing best practices and encourage the development of new ideas. In the speech, he explained that the junior college movement had matured, but the junior and community colleges had not reached full development. There would be benefit in bringing together
leaders who had contributed significantly to the growth and development of junior colleges for study of what was in place and of new directions. The speech, “On the Threshold of Greatness,” was published in the *American Association of Junior Colleges Journal* reaching a wider audience than just those in attendance at the convention.

In 1967, B. Lamar Johnson, a professor in higher education at the University of California at Los Angeles, invited a select group of junior and community college presidents to form just such an organization. Even though the Dallas County Junior College District was only a year old and had only one college in operation, Priest’s invitation to participate was based on the fact he was already recognized as a national leader in two-year education and El Centro had already set a standard as a national model in the areas of counseling and developmental studies.

Rather than the term of “academy” that Priest had used, the organization became the League for Innovation. It was officially founded in 1968 and Johnson was the founding Executive Director but served only in a part-time capacity. In a relatively short time it was determined that a full-time director was needed. Terry O’Banion was selected to be the first full-time executive director. Priest chaired the hiring committee and was initially put off by O’Banion’s rather free-spirit demeanor. He knew O’Banion had the experience necessary: he was then a professor at the University of Illinois, he had worked in fund raising, and also as a dean in a community college. During the interview, O’Banion revealed himself to be astute and savvy about higher education issues and the important place of two-year colleges. The League for Innovation under O’Banion’s leadership proved to be a valuable asset to the community college movement.

The attitude of always seeking new solutions and taking risks seemed to be an innate part of Priest. His basic nature was the springboard for his behavior and management philosophy. In his job as President of American River College in 1959, Priest wrote an article about the problems facing this new entity in higher education. He wrote, “The absence of universally accepted ‘ground
rules’ assures an experimental attitude in operational situations, which is certain to produce a continuous flow of better answers to many problems being dealt with throughout the nation.” This implied that necessity was the mother of innovation, but Priest’s drive for betterment went far beyond the need to solve problems.

He had absolute intolerance for those who had become too comfortable with the status quo. He saw education as being in a state of transition and demanding more than sacred, time-tested routes to traditional ends. There were faculty members who held strong to the belief in the intrinsic value of education for the ethereal sake of education. Priest insisted that more pragmatic approaches were necessary for pragmatic results. He knew that two-year colleges were not miniature universities filled with new high school graduates headed toward a bachelor’s degree. Many community college students were lacking a high school diploma or had several intervening years since graduation; their motivation for attending college was to acquire marketable skills to get a good job. For some that would require transferring to a four-year institution and pursuing a bachelor’s degree. For a high percentage that would entail earning a certificate or an associate’s degree in a technical or vocational field. Priest chided faculty and administrators who resisted these changing demographics. The battle was not quickly won. Almost ten years later in an article in the *Dallas Morning News* on the value of higher education, Priest described the raw process of change as these resisters “were kicking and screaming and being dragged into the world of reality” by daily experiences on campus.

Another reality resisted by the majority of the academic community was marketing, the need to get word out to the public about the college and what it had to offer. In the mid-sixties, marketing was not the popular term—there was sales and there was public relations. Both were viewed by most in higher education as slick presentations of mostly hype to solicit favor and money on products or services. Academicians felt it was demeaning to education to use such methods. Education had intrinsic value and did not need to be “sold.” Through formal course work and
experience, Priest knew that both sales and public relations were essential to having a well attended and respected college. Certainly, the strongest marketing tool is a legion of successful graduates who, by excellent performances in the workplace and by their own expressions of their satisfaction with the junior college experiences, represent and promote the community college. Word-of-mouth has always been and still is the best form of marketing, but it is limited and slow and is only one aspect of a total marketing program.

Priest’s grasp of the fundamental value of marketing as a critical element of the success of a college and in the positive progress of the community college movement, gave him an extra dimension in his leadership role of president of the Dallas Junior College District. He saw public relations as a necessity for institutional success in maintaining a positive image with the community and news media. He understood the need to “sell” by letting the public know the courses, degrees, and services that were available to them. He knew the importance of every aspect from internal marketing to external target market research.65

The importance of public relations was the focus of an article Priest wrote in the early 1950s. He advised junior college presidents to survey the community for needs and expectations, and to develop good media relations by maintaining an accurate flow of information externally and internally. He further advised them to create collateral material to augment what was done by the media.66

Priest was so delighted with the supportive media, both print and electronic, he found in Dallas because he knew how powerful the media was in influencing public opinion. The media was equally delighted with him because he appreciated them and kept them informed. He knew how to use them in that he was well aware of what they should not be used for. According to thirty-year television news veteran, John Whitson, the best way to use the news media for positive results is simply to keep them supplied with accurate information, and always to allow them access to whomever they want to interview. He emphasized that nothing makes a reporter more suspicious than being told “no comment” or that a key person is unavailable for comment. Priest created a partnership with the
news media. He was always honest and quick to respond, and he appreciated reporters calling him if they “uncovered something.”

Priest was among the first junior college leaders in the country to hire a full-time public relations person. Sybil Hamilton, a former member of the Dallas City Council, assisted him with keeping the media informed, producing promotional materials, and working with the Texas State Legislature on educational issues. The approach to public relations was not the glitz and glitter reviled by educators, but one of providing a steady flow of accurate and honest information whether in a press release, brochure, or statistics for the legislature. Priest was so insistent on accuracy that Hamilton once sent him a picture of himself taken when he accepted the Dallas position with a note paper clipped to it, “You need a new picture. This one has too much hair.” He had a new picture made. He had to be true to his external market.

Throughout his tenure as chancellor, Priest kept the person in the role of public relations for the district in the inner circle and part of the information loop. Public relation directors were not viewed by Priest as feature writers, but as intelligent professionals who had a great deal to contribute to the organization. He realized it was essential for that person to be up to speed on the happenings, good or bad, that were going on in the district in order for them to respond knowledgably to questions from the press. At his retirement, he thanked then DCCCD Director Claudia Robinson and all of the campus directors of public information for having made improvements in spreading the word of the colleges’ “manpower development capabilities.” The development of a campus position in public information was directly attributable to Priest’s erudition of marketing’s place in the success of a college.

As for the internal market, Priest tried to keep a clear downward flow of information. He knew the importance of two-way communication for high morale and effective management. The most important internal market was the Board of Trustees. Terry O’Banion, long term executive director of the League for Innovation said that Priest set a national precedent in the governance model established with the Dallas board. Priest’s
speeches, writings and interviews are filled with laudation for the Dallas County Community College Board and are replete with points on the importance of open communication lines and positive working relationship any chief executive officer must maintain with the Board of Directors/Trustees. Priest’s acumen on board relations put in place a governance model unique to most educational institutions. In 1995, “The Carver Model of Governance” was published and followed by many college boards including the DCCCD board. That model outlined the unwritten philosophy under which Priest and the early Dallas boards functioned. Its tenants are simple: the board sets policy, they deal with the chancellor, and the chancellor handles the rest. That is soundly in place today.

The one aspect in which this has changed is directly related to the Texas Open Meetings Law. In those first years, there were private pre-meeting meetings usually held over dinner at the Dallas Club. In the words of the first board chair, Bob Thornton, “When we went into the formal meeting we’d already had our bloodletting.” Even with the end of those pre-meetings, the telephone calls continued. Priest had made a practice of sending a printed agenda of the forthcoming meeting to each board member with a personal cover memorandum explaining items that needed additional data for clear understanding. When there was an item that he knew was of particular concern to a trustee, he would give a heads-up call to answer questions or provide additional information. Likewise, board members called Priest if they had questions or real reservations on an issue. They would ask for information beforehand, rather than taking the time in the public meetings. It was a system that worked well for the board and for the college district.

Priest used an expression, “the care and feeding of board members.” It sounded condescending or sarcastic at best, but it was pure in its oversimplification of the principles of good communication and good working relationships. Priest said he almost had Bob Thornton convinced to co-author an article by that title. Priest explained the phrase as “very close to the top in importance of anything a chief administrator does. A leader must
be able to see from the window of each board member and must address it. Admit to your sins. Be thoughtful. Be considerate. Make a simple telephone call before meetings to prepare them. There should be no surprises. Let them know if one of your recommendations is going to be in opposition to their view. Solicit their support. Is that political? Yes, but it’s good politics. It’s communication.”^72 He was always well researched in matters to be presented at the meetings. In his fifteen-year tenure with the DCCCD, not one of Priest’s recommendations was ever voted down; most passed unanimously.^^73 There were times when the amount of discussion seemed to indicate that more research was necessary. At that point, Priest would ask to withdraw the item from the agenda and to table it for further study. ^^74

It was that genuine enthusiasm of the original board for the task at hand that was of prime importance in Priest’s decision to accept the Dallas job. He had been enticed by the idea of working with people who wanted what he wanted. That speculation proved to be true. The first board members were fantastic logistical providers. Priest recalled, “I never had to worry about if they would be there. I didn’t have to spend sixty percent of my time feeding them information. They asked, ‘What can we do to get it done?’ and it was done.”^^75 He attributes the success of the DCCCD to the Board of Trustees.

That admiration of Priest for the board was mutual and expressed often and publicly. In 1971, Thornton was quoted in *Dallas Scene Magazine*, “When you have an administration you have great respect for, you don’t have any thorny problems.”^^76 Ten years later, then board member Robert Powers echoed that sentiment in an article in *D Magazine*, “From public experience, I never dealt with anybody like Bill Priest in terms of candor, ability, and following his goal of making this the best district.”^^77

The greatest demonstration of respect and trust was represented in the latitude the board gave to Priest. From the onset, Thornton publicly stated the faith the board had in him. He said the trustees were unanimous in their support to give Priest direct responsibility and authority to do his job without continually seeking a vote.^^78
That first board was in one accord and seemingly singular in mind, perhaps because they were all on the ground floor in beginning this new educational venture for the citizens of Dallas County. In New Guinea’s Pidgin language there is a word, *wanbel*. It means of one mind for one goal. That is the way the first board functioned. It was so utopian, even Priest questioned its reality. Priest dealt most often with the board chair. He wondered if he were somehow being inappropriate or making the other members feel excluded. He queried one of the Trustees about protocol. The board member reassured him that if ever there was disagreement or dissatisfaction that it would be expressed. Each member felt free to call Priest directly. He further explained why Thornton was so confidently given the lead by the other Trustees by offering an analogy, “If you want to win the Kentucky Derby, you don’t get a plow horse.”

Thornton was a paragon of accomplishment.

This efficient and successful, albeit somewhat guarded, form of doing business brought public criticism from a local magazine the year before Priest announced his retirement. The article in *D Magazine* referred to the governance of the DCCCD as “old-style Dallas politics.” The article further condemned the district by saying, “The community college district has escaped democracy. It is the last Dallas public institution to be dominated by the business community.” In that article, Bill Bancroft quoted Priest’s defense of the system by attributing the “placid relationship as one of the key ingredients in successfully building a quality community college system.” Priest further explained that if it was necessary “to make waves” in order to get to an important target and accomplish what needed to be done, then that was what would have been done. He stressed that agreement should not garner “negative brownie points.” The article also pointed critically to low voter turnout for board elections. Priest indicated the lack of involvement from the populace was tantamount to a vote of confidence in the status quo.

Margaret McDermott summed up the success of the working relationships of the board and Priest in a more personal way. She said there was mutual support for each other in the work at hand that resulted in friendships. She acknowledged there were
disagreements, but they worked them through. One of the elements that kept those disagreements from erupting into public power plays was lack of egotism. Priest’s ego was tied to the success of the college district as a whole, not who individually received credit for it. The board members did not need to exhibit egos in their jobs as trustees because they had earned their stature elsewhere and felt no need to make power plays within the workings of the district. This was confirmed by 1980s board chair, Jerry Gilmore as quoted in *D Magazine*, “This has not been a place for political ‘showboating’ or a platform for personal ambitions.”

The leadership of Dallas County determined that a community college was the right direction for higher education in the fast growing county, even though the concept was new and somewhat undefined. Don Rippey, the first president of El Centro College, credited “the Dallas power structure” for having the wisdom to broaden the base of accessible education beyond one that only benefits the elite. The development of a downtown college first broadened the constituency by being convenient to those who worked downtown, and being accessible by public transportation. In establishing its content of courses and services, the philosophy and organizational structure was in place for the addition of the other six colleges to locate a campus within twenty minutes drive time of anyone living or working in Dallas County.