The word legacy by definition denotes something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor from the past. It is derived from the middle English and middle French word, legate. A legate is an official emissary. It is akin to the word legend which is a story or body of stories coming down from the past. Not part of the word form, but definitely part of a legacy are monuments defined as evidence of someone notable, the placement of a stone or a building erected in remembrance of a person. The legacies of Bill Priest represent all three definitions. His legacy, in many ways, bequeathed to future generations all that he contributed to the development of community colleges. He mentored, gave opportunities to, and otherwise helped to develop a number of educational emissaries. Finally, in tribute to all that he did, several “monuments” carry his name.

Many of the elements of higher education that Priest transmitted to current students began in California: the associate degree in nursing, televised courses, and non credit courses; but these were honed and expanded during his tenure in Dallas. At the time of his retirement, DCCCD board member Pattie Powell spotlighted
some of Priest’s accomplishments. She credited Priest with being a true advocate for adult learning by offering a healthy schedule of courses, both credit and non credit, in the evenings. Non credit courses have always been coordinated through a separate department. In expanding outreach services, each of the seven colleges have added a corporate training or workforce education arm in which non credit instruction is designed specifically for the company. Those classes are often held on site at the company.

Powell further lauded Priest for blazing “the trail for developmental studies in the mid-sixties.” In the state of Texas, developmental courses became more important after the state added its own test for entering freshman with required remediation until all sections of the TASP test area were passed. English as a second language has been added to the developmental roster to assist the increasing number of immigrants and international students. Over one hundred countries are represented among the students in the DCCCD.

The movement of nursing education from the hospitals to colleges is called by some, the most important change in higher education in the twentieth century. It certainly has proven to be a positive for the field of medical care since the associate degree nursing program in community colleges is the primary supplier of registered nurses in the country.

Others call distance education, which began with televised courses and has extended to courses offered on the internet, as the most significant innovation in higher education. Priest was one of the early pioneers in the area, piloting a live broadcast government course in California. It was in the DCCCD where he supported the development of the concept to a national standard. Shortly after his retirement in 1981, the Instructional Television name was changed to the Center for Telecommunications. By 1989, it was touted as the community college leader in offering courses via television. That same year, the district built a new facility for the production of telecourses with state of the art studios. One studio was designed specifically for instruction via live broadcasts to multiple sites with interactive capabilities permitting students to
ask questions of the instructor during the broadcast. The teaching studio also allowed the instructor to be the director, as they could switch from a front shot camera, or to an overhead camera, to running a video tape. The new facility, located on the northwest side of the Richland College campus, was named the R. Jan LeCroy Center for Educational Telecommunications. LeCroy was selected as chancellor after Priest’s retirement. LeCroy continued and increased support for distance learning. The LeCroy Center staff has won numerous awards for excellence from the National University Telecommunications Network. They offer professionally produced courses via PBS and cable networks, sell their courses to clients in the United States and thirty foreign countries, and now participate in the Global Learning Network with on-line courses. In the late 1990s, DCCCD and thirty other education institutions created a virtual institution called the Western Governors University, and the DCCCD is the only community college system in Texas that participates.

While there is variance in the minds of people as to the single innovation that could be called Priest’s greatest contribution to higher education, there is concurrence among professionals in the field that establishing the Dallas County Community College District and developing it into a national model is at the top of the list, and that it had a profound effect on the community college movement. Terry O’Banion, the first full-time president of the League for Innovation, said, “as the district grew, every new building, every new instructional program set a national standard.”^2^ Dale Parnell, former President of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, evaluated the DCCCD from two perspectives: as president of the national organization for all two-year institutions of higher learning and as chancellor of a multi-college district. In the mid 1970s, as chancellor of San Diego Community College District, Parnell and his Board of Trustees made a benchmark trip to Dallas to study the innovations in instruction and the creative approaches to effectively running a multi-college district. From a national viewpoint, Parnell called the DCCCD a model. He said it helped to set the direction for the growth and development of
junior colleges into comprehensive community colleges. For the establishment of this model, Parnell gave credit to Priest. He said, “Priest went to Texas with several years experience, some great ideas and built that [Dallas County] district from nothing. It quickly took the lead in innovations over older institutions and became a national model.” Parnell specified Santa Fe Community College and San Juan College in Farmington, New Mexico as two colleges that looked to the DCCCD as a model for their development.

The facilities themselves were innovations for the time. Each campus won a variety of architectural awards for design. The farsightedness of Priest and the founding board for purchasing what some thought was too much land for each campus was indeed appropriate. Each college continues to add programs and buildings. Advances in technology and the increase in students both call for additional space. In the spring of 2002, the DCCCD hit an all time record enrollment of 54,702 in credit classes and an additional 32,296 in non credit continuing education courses. The growth in population around each of the campuses and the escalating cost of land makes additional land purchases prohibitive.

A less obvious remaining effect in the district is the attitude of expected innovation, creativity, and risk taking. Priest led by example in taking risks and being the first to try a new medium for instruction or accept students branded by much of higher education as “not college material.” He demanded innovation from those who worked for him reminding them that nothing moves forward without some risk-taking in new efforts. That expectation quietly resounds in the college halls today. “But we’ve always done it this way,” or “That’s never been done before,” are unacceptable reasons for not trying a new idea. Resting on previous successes is not allowed. The striving for continuous quality improvement and better ways of doing whatever the process is, keeps the DCCCD a vibrant and stimulating place to work and learn.

The continued growth and successes of the various entities of the DCCCD is a testament to its value even without the verbal laurels from educational professionals throughout the country. Priest himself designates the building of the DCCCD as his greatest
contribution to education, but without taking much personal credit. Thirteen years after his retirement when he was asked what he thought was his best accomplishment in his career, he answered, “Being privileged to play a lead role in the development of the Dallas County Community College District at a crucial time in community college history and education in this area, and nationally. I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time doing something I knew a good bit about, in a place where I had tremendous positives going for me to do what needed to be done. This unquestionably is my Mona Lisa. This is the thing which I think is head and shoulders above other things I did. Of course, this broke down into many, many, pieces. But to generalize, being permitted to lead the charge of the development of community colleges in this megalopolis was it, and I got a lot of credit for things anyone could have done, but I did them and I did them well and so I got credit for them.”

According to Margaret McDermott, who was there from the beginning, “Without Bill Priest there would not have been a Dallas County Community College District. He’s a hero.” In an interview five years after he had retired as DCCCD chancellor, R. Jan LeCroy, Priest’s successor, echoed the sentiments of many, “By building this exemplary district, that’s a huge contribution. To take all [Priest’s] experience and background resources and build this district as a model, that’s his primary contribution.”

While Priest thought it his good fortune to be chosen as the chancellor to assist in building the new Dallas district, he did not take it lightly, nor did he indicate it was an easy task even with all of the support from the board and the ample funding package they had acquired. He stated quite frankly, “I worked my tail off. I did everything I could to make it happen, but the beauty is sometimes you do that and nothing happens. This time, I did it and a lot of good things happened.”

Indeed, “a lot of good things happened” and continue to happen. Powell, who remains on the DCCCD Board of Trustees and has served as chair, summed up Priest’s forty-two-year career by saying, “The innovation in which Bill Priest has been a prime
mover reads today like a text of community college fundamentals. The innovations of this era have rapidly passed into standard practice in community colleges across the country.”8 In a review of current community college literature, such as American Association of Community Colleges’ 2000 publication, The Knowledge Net, A Report of the New Expectations Initiative, one finds recommended practices and new directions built on the rudiments of those early principles and innovations of the Dallas County Community College District.

The valuable contributions that Priest made to other community colleges through his role as chancellor of the DCCCD is well documented, but locally the impact was much broader than a good higher educational system. In 1978, after Brookhaven College, the final campus of the district, was opened, an editorial by J. Wright ran in the Dallas Morning News praising the value to the area. He wrote, “The people of Dallas County have just finished building what may be considered the most enriching possession of all—our community college system.”9

The boundless benefit to the citizens of Dallas County and the county’s economic development was detailed by Jerry Gilmore, board chair in 1981. He said, “In no small way, it has been the hand of Bill Priest which has opened the door to higher education for thousands upon thousands of Dallas County citizens who would otherwise have been locked out by finances, distance, or insurmountable entrance requirements. This opportunity has been significant not only to the many who have enrolled as students, but to all county residents who have enjoyed the by-products of an enhanced environment for business and industry, cultural centers within easy driving distance, and the countless intangible benefits that accrue to an educated citizenry.”10 Those by-products are not only still being produced by the Dallas district, but also continue to grow and improve.

There is close interaction between the employees at the colleges and the communities’ Chambers of Commerce, civic and service clubs, city governments and independent school districts. Community leaders serve on the advisory boards for educational
programs at the colleges, and college faculty, staff, and administrators serve on boards and committees in the communities. College representatives often assist city and chamber members in recruiting new businesses to the area. The colleges offer quality cultural events by students and host professional performers with low cost tickets for the community. The community colleges today are much more than educators of the citizens to help build a skilled work force. The comprehensive community college is a participating member of the community. This is the philosophy set forth by Priest in the articles he authored in the late 1950s and repeated in future writings and many speeches.

Priest was revered by the business community and the leaders in Dallas and its surrounding suburbs. He had a close working relationship with all the elements that come together in a metropolitan area. Founding president of El Centro, Don Rippey described Priest as an integral part of the development and growth of the city of Dallas as were the Thornton family, the Caruths, the Hunts, Earl Cabell, and Stanley Marcus. In an interview in 1994, Rippey said, “Priest was one of the almost mythical people that built Dallas. Even today, he has that image which is rare.”

All of his ideas, philosophies, and innovations that culminated in the Dallas County Community College District are unarguably Priest’s legacy as something transmitted by a predecessor from the past. What of the legate, an official emissary, the person to carry the message and the mission forward? These are the people Priest mentored or indirectly influenced in their professional growth. Many people cited the hiring and the development of people as one of Priest’s strengths. Claudia Robinson noted that Priest was a good observer of human nature and could quickly size up a person’s strengths and weaknesses. One of Priest’s adages was “first rate people hire first rate people.” This meant the hire at the first level could influence the quality of hires throughout that division. This stress on quality which Priest primarily judged through past accomplishments did not mean he would not allow for weaknesses and mistakes. He expected employees to compensate for weak areas and to learn from mistakes. Another
Priest axiom was that “the only dumb mistakes are those you make twice.”\textsuperscript{13} Allowing the first mistake was indicative of Priest’s high value on risk-taking and he looked for that quality when he was hiring.

Priest agreed with that estimation from others. He regarded himself to be “a pretty good people picker.”\textsuperscript{14} The characteristics he looked for in an applicant were dedication, stability, loyalty, perseverance, insight, being a self-starter, being a team player, willingness to pull their own weight, and undeveloped leadership ability. He believed that accomplishments are a good indicator of an employee’s abilities, but viewed in isolation could skew the data. He felt a person could be quite productive at one level, but ineffectual at a single level higher because of a new set of demands. He also believed that the reverse could be true and a mediocre performer at a lower level might move up where their particular attributes would be a good fit. Robinson felt that her interview with Priest was the best and most thorough she had ever had.

Those interview skills and observations of people’s performances often surpassed their own expectations of themselves. Deon Holt was a journalism major and had worked with Priest at Los Rios Junior College District in Sacramento, California. He had split responsibilities teaching journalism and handling public relations duties for the district. Priest called him from his new job in Dallas and asked Holt to join his team as vice president of Planning and Development. This was not a career direction Holt had ever imagined for himself and was quite a leap from teaching and public relations. Priest indicated he knew Holt to be bright, trainable, and capable of learning whatever he needed to. Holt accepted the position, did an excellent job, and later served as the first president of Richland and then the first president of Brookhaven. Again he did well in the role of president at each college. Ironically, one of his most public mistakes was in the area of journalism. As the new president of Richland, he oversaw the production of the first catalogue. This would allow him to draw on his primary education and experience, and also expedite the process. He proofed carefully at each phase, and the day the published books arrived, he noticed
his mistake. In the listing of administrators, under “president,” Deon’s name was listed as “Leon.”

In 1982 Holt left the district, returning to California to take the position of chancellor of the Mira Costa College District in Oceanside. He attributed success in his own career to following Priest’s example and advice. Specifically he noted his philosophies of hiring the best, never making the same mistake twice, and holding your staff to that same standard; above all, he cited Priest’s example of the “care and feeding of the board.” Holt called Priest masterful in that sometimes delicate working relationship.

Another person’s career influenced by Priest was that of Linda Timmerman. In 1975, Priest was without a secretary. Timmerman was at that time the secretary to the president of Mountain View. She was at home on maternity leave when Priest telephoned her. Most of the conversation that transpired might have been considered politically incorrect or even illegal by today’s standards, but Timmerman took no offense and heard it as forthright, clear, and fair, and Priest expected the same from her. He indicated she had a good reputation and he did not want to have to break in someone new to the district. He also made it clear that he believed new babies should not be left in a daycare facility and if she was willing to take the job, he was willing to give her a salary that would cover the cost of in-home care for her child. He did not want an immediate answer, and encouraged her to discuss it with her husband. The implication was when he got an answer, he wanted it to be based on thorough consideration and to be definite. She appreciated his honesty on every count and she accepted the position.

Priest gave Timmerman opportunities she had not expected, such as attending the formation meetings of the League for Innovation to “just be a fly on the wall and observe.” In daily operations, Timmerman noticed how he genuinely cared about every person in the district. He once cancelled classes at all the campuses because there was a forecast of an ice storm by mid-day. Texas ice storms are more treacherous than the more common snows of northern states. Not a cloud appeared in the sky that day,
and he took criticism for the decision. The next day, he did not cancel classes and the storm arrived in full-force. Then he took criticism for that decision. Making a closure decision in advance of the arrival of severe weather is always difficult. Priest tried to protect and be fair to the staff and students, but he also had a deep sense of protecting the taxpayer’s money. Although Priest describes himself as having a temper, Timmerman indicated she never saw him angry, only disappointed. He wrote in her evaluation one year that if she were given the opportunity to get a degree she would become a high level administrator.

Timmerman left the district in September of 1978. By 1981 she had a bachelor’s degree, by 1985 her master’s, and by 1991 she earned her doctorate of education. In route to her doctorate, she asked for Priest to write a recommendation for her. Priest reports that she asked, “Would you lie for me one more time?” Priest was quick to add, “No lies were necessary for that lady.”

Timmerman is currently the vice president of Institutional Advancement at Navarro College in Corsicana, Texas. She reports that daily she uses things she learned from Priest. He taught her to discern between personal and professional remarks by others, and that the leader does not have to know it all. She learned from him not to micro manage and to give authority away when possible. Timmerman indicated that from Priest’s example, she learned the whole foundation for moral leadership and that is what good leadership is based on.

Not as drastic a change as for Holt or Timmerman, Steve Mittlestet, president of Richland College, counts himself among those in whom Priest saw a potential that he had not seen in himself. Mittlestet was the dean of Continuing Education when Priest asked him to come to the district office to serve in a combined role of being his assistant, and overseeing certain aspects of planning and development and instructional television. Mittlestet was taken aback. His career goal had been vice president of Instruction at the college level. That was the focus of his education and his experience. He never saw himself in a district office role. Looking back, Mittlestet concurred that Priest was right. The broad scope
of those duties was better experience and prepared him for the presidency. He learned things from a district perspective, as well as a campus perspective, and learned about the complexities of a college’s physical plan. Priest believes a college president needs to be a generalist who then hires the specialists. Mittlestet learned the value of that philosophy. Under Mittlestet’s leadership, Richland College has evolved into a premier community college and consistently leads the other colleges in enrollment.

Priest’s emissaries are not limited to employees of the district who worked directly under his supervision. The National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) is an annual conference for community college professionals coordinated by the Community College Leadership Doctoral Program at the University of Texas in Austin. In the general assembly at the 1991 NISOD conference, John Rouche, who succeeded C. C. Colvert as the Director of that program, credited Bill Priest for the success of NISOD. That seemingly was a far stretch until he explained. In 1977, Rouche was planning a community college consortium that would focus on improving instruction, retention, and student success. He called together an advisory committee of community college presidents and chancellors. Most of the presidents on the committee and the faculty at the University of Texas program thought the event should be held in the fall to kick-off the year and to motivate and inspire teachers. Priest was the sole abstainer. According to Rouche, he “gave a lengthy, but focused, presentation on why the NISOD conference should be at the end of the school year rather than the beginning” His point was that faculty would have a freer schedule to attend and the event could be a celebration of a successful school year. He also pointed out to his colleagues that there was usually money left at the end of the spring semester to allow each college to send more people. The conference was scheduled for May at the close of the spring semester and has become one of the best-attended conferences for community college professionals. Numerous faculty and administrators from the DCCCD attend the NISOD conference and several have earned doctorates from the University of Texas.
Community College Leadership Program. Like a pebble tossed in a lake, the ripple effect of ideas shared touches many educators for years to come.

The reputation of the DCCCD has always attracted excellent applicants from across the country. That was part of the attraction for Alice Villadsen, vice president of Central Piedmont College in Charlotte, North Carolina, when she applied for the President’s position at Brookhaven College in 1997. She was hired and officially assumed the post in July of 1998. Villadsen was delighted to learn that Bill Priest was still involved with the district. She explained, “Upon becoming president in the Dallas district, I was surprised and amazed to discover that Bill Priest, the man himself, was available to me. What a joy it has been to be with him, to enjoy his stories, and to see the still-bright twinkle in his eyes when I report on some good thing about Brookhaven College. He has become a strong mentor and advisor.”

The development of emissaries continues, and they occasionally reveal themselves in unexpected places. The DCCCD hosted a reception for the newly named chancellor of the University of North Texas, Lee Jackson, who had served for many years as a county judge in the Dallas area. The event was held in the City Club in downtown Dallas on November 1, 2002. Bill Priest was there with other administrators from the DCCCD and the university. In his remarks, Jackson stated he was pleased to be working at a University that has a doctoral program in higher education named in honor of Bill Priest. He went on to say that Priest had been a friend and supporter for many years, frequently sending him notes of encouragement especially when it was known he was dealing with difficult issues. Completely out of the purview of his role as chancellor, Priest had reached out to a young judge he viewed as worthy of support. That judge moved to the arena of higher education in the very institution teaching and training current and future leaders in community colleges.

The legacy of Priest also warranted a monument, something erected in honor of his accomplishments. There are four places that carry his name, two are in California and two in Texas.
The first place christened with the Priest name was in truth in recognition of the family rather than him. The street that ran in front of his boyhood home in the rural area between French Camp and Stockton was named Priest Lane. Swift Sparks, step grandson of Bill Priest, visited the area to see first hand the corner street sign at the intersection of Priest and French Camp. He presented a framed photograph of the corner complete with street sign to his step grandfather for Christmas that year.

The other three monuments were in tribute to Bill Priest himself. While superintendent of American River Junior College District in Sacramento, Priest oversaw the construction of a new administration building in 1956. After he accepted the position of superintendent of Los Rios Community College District, which was created from a merger of American River and Sacramento City Colleges, the Los Rios Board of Trustees honored Priest by naming the administration building for him. The Bill J. Priest Administration Building is still part of the campus today.

After Priest announced his planned retirement for January 1981 as chancellor of the Dallas County Community College District, the Board of Trustees conducted a national search to fill the position that spring. The vice chancellor of academic affairs, R. Jan LeCroy was selected as the new chancellor. Programs and services continued to be added to the college offerings. Several new areas, all related to working directly with the business community, were put in place in the district by various grant awards. One new division, funded with hard money (i.e. funding that is repetitive, not a one time grant or gift), was The Business and Professional Institute. The purpose of this division was to represent each college to business and industry with direct marketing of credit and non credit courses. In 1987, LeCroy and his successor as vice chancellor, Jack Stone, decided to bring all of these new programs and the long standing Job Training Center (which was at El Centro) under the direction of one administrator. The other grant funded programs included the North Texas Small Business Development Center, and The Center for Government Contracting. Such a combination of similar programs called for a new facility. At the April board meeting, Bob
Bettis, the board chair, announced that the new building would be named in honor of Priest.

A site was selected on the southeast edge of downtown Dallas. Construction took two years and in the intervening time, plans for a Business Incubation Program was added to the mix. Finding a name as an umbrella for the variety of programs to be housed in the new building and that would work well with Bill J. Priest was a challenge. Lengthy discussions and brainstorming sessions were held by those who worked in the various departments and among the top administrators in the district. The building opened in 1989 and was officially named the Bill J. Priest Institute for Economic Development. The length of the name had district employees searching for a shortened version, as is most common with facility names. It was quickly realized that “Priest Institute” could create misunderstandings. Using initials only, BJPIED, was still too long. A shortened set of initials, PIED, could be pronounced as an acronym, but the word conjured up visions of dessert or the Pied Piper of Hamlin. Without discussion, usage through time has evolved into simply the BJP as the reference of choice. The name still causes some confusion on the part of the public. With his name prominently placed across the top of the building and on all of the literature, Priest says that he should be back on the payroll for all of the phone calls for the Institute that he fields at his personal residence.

By 1990, it was decided the institute should carry more than Priest’s name in tribute to him. The district archives had a few items, but not enough for a full display. Those in charge of the project approached Priest and asked him to contribute a few more articles. He obliged with an array of trophies and plaques acquired by a lifetime of achievements. A floor to ceiling display case was constructed on the back wall of the foyer at the front entrance of the building. Priest had imagined a small free standing trophy case. When he saw the display, he was impressed with the artistry of the effort and the massive size. He, as is his nature, was humbled by the expansive tribute to him.

The most recent namesake is not a structure, but an educational program, perhaps the most fitting of tributes. In September 2000,
The University of North Texas announced the establishment of the Bill J. Priest Center for Community College Education. The core courses are a cognate of the Higher Education Doctoral Program in the College of Education. The Priest Center for Community College Education also offers conferences, seminars, and a white paper series for community college faculty and administrators.

Naming the center after Priest did not come as an afterthought in order to honor him. In fact, it was his many contributions to community college education and the establishment of the DCCCD in proximity to the university that inspired the creation of a community college doctoral major in the Higher Education Program. A small group began discussing the idea, and as the plan took form, additional University of North Texas administrators became members of the committee. Data gathered demonstrated a need for the program. As there were not many new community colleges being built in the country, existing colleges were growing. There were numerous articles in professional journals pointing to the “graying of the campuses.” High percentages of administrators and faculty members are retiring or soon to retire. The need for advanced educational offerings for new administrators and faculty members was apparent. Also, there was a review of other doctoral level programs for community college careers paths. Nationally there were few and some of those were struggling. The strongest program was at the University of Texas in Austin. Great effort was made in the planning of the University of North Texas program to compliment rather than compete with that program. A major difference was the option of a teaching discipline for faculty in conjunction with the community college focused courses.

A formal proposal was presented to the university’s top administration and approved. The plans of the committee became reality with a million dollar donation from Don Buchholtz, former DCCCD Board of Trustees member and chair. This generous donation established the Buchholtz Endowed Chair and gave impetus to begin course offerings. An advisory committee of current and former regional community college chancellors, University of
North Texas faculty and administrators, and Bill Priest meet several times a year to hear about progress in the program, reflect on new ideas, and offer guidance.

Above all of the other tributes to Priest, this is the most appropriate. It is not merely a name emblazoned on a sign. It extends the ideologies and benefits of community college education into perpetuity. The program will teach those who will teach and mentor others. It is a befitting commendation for one of the pioneers in community college education.

As of September of 2003, Priest is retired from public life, but has in no way retired from being well-read on current issues in community colleges and the legislative actions that affect them. His counsel is still sought by current leadership in higher education and his ability to engage the interest of an audience of one or one-hundred has not waned.