Past Tense: Glimpses into Portland State History

Remembering Portland State: Historical Reflections and Personal Perspectives on Our University

2009

Past Tense, 2009

Retired Association of Portland State

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A full decade before Stephen Epler launched the 1946 academic program at Vanport that produced PSU, he coached the Chester, Nebraska, high school football team. The Great Depression’s economic distress and dustbowl conditions resulted in declining rural area school enrollments throughout the Great Plains region, making it increasingly difficult to maintain traditional small-town athletic programs, even though students and townsfolk enthusiastically supported football. In 1934 Epler rescued this popular athletic-educational activity by introducing game modifications, making it feasible for low-enrollment schools to field teams with six or eight positions. Six-man football caught on instantly and grew to the point where—according to feature stories of the day in the New York Times and the Omaha World Herald—several hundred schools from Texas to Saskatchewan scheduled “Friday Night Lite” pigskin contests.

Upon joining the PSU History Department in January 1959, a colleague of mine related Epler’s founding father role to me and casually mentioned his six-man football innovation. That resonated with me inasmuch as the small-town secondary school that I attended had adopted six-man football in 1937, enabling me to play every autumn for eight years. When PSU honored founder Stephen Epler, the “Vanport Visionary,” at its 50th anniversary in 1996, I introduced myself in a receiving line and thanked him for founding an institution where I had enjoyed a lifetime career. I added that he had positively influenced my earlier life while I had played six-man football in junior and senior high school. At that point, he immediately led me to a corner table to quiz me about my involvement in the game that he had invented. I owe him a two-part debt of gratitude for his ingenuity, perhaps most of all for his invention.

—Victor C. Dahl, Professor Emeritus of History

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ESL program booms at Portland State

SC Offers ‘Zip’ English”—that was the headline over an article that appeared in The Oregonian on Dec. 6, 1964, describing the new 12-credit English 110 program for 36 Saudi students at Portland State College. Prof. Naguib Greis, who grew up in Egypt, initiated the Center for English as a Second Language at Portland State and directed it for the next 25 years. The center was one of the first university-based academic ESL programs in the western United States.

When the center opened, all of the students were from Saudi Arabia. There were two sections, taught by Esther Richards, Helen Schley, Alfred Sugarman, and Francis Gibson from the Speech Department, and two graduate assistants. Prof. Greis soon realized the need to broaden the enrollment to students from other countries.

At the same time the center was expanding, TESL Certificate and M.A. TESOL programs were developed to prepare teachers to meet the growing needs of the community. These programs were part of the English Department until 1988, when the Applied Linguistics Department was formed, with Jim Nattinger as chair.

Four of the ESL instructors, Prue Douglas, Jan DeCarrico, Shirley Morrell, and I, taught for many years and played an active role in organizing the Oregon chapter of TESOL. When we started presenting papers at national conferences and fomenting change in the program, Prof. Greis dubbed us the “Gang of Four,” a title that we proudly carried as we each taught teachers in China in the 1980s.

—Marge Terdal, Professor Emerita of Applied Linguistics

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In the spring of 1956, Richard Sanders (center) was a founder and the first editor of the student literary quarterly, The Portland State Review of Student Writing, which evolved into The Portland Review. Prof. James Lill, English, served as faculty adviser. The other Review founders were Don Carpenter (left), who became a successful novelist and screenwriter, and Richard J. Kennedy (right), author of the award-winning children’s novel Amy’s Eyes.

In 2006—a half century later—Sanders was the spark behind another literary endeavor, a book chronicling the growth and development of Portland State. Over the next three years, he researched and wrote the text for Portland State: A History in Pictures, which celebrates the institution’s transformation from extension center to the largest university in the state. The book is currently in press, with delivery expected this spring.

In the five decades between The Portland State Review and Portland State: A History in Pictures, Sanders taught high school English, journalism, and speech, wrote and edited textbooks, worked in public affairs for the California Department of Social Welfare, and became a speechwriter for governors in California and Oregon. He died Feb. 9 in Portland at the age of 77.

—Dawn White

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Gordon Solie ’59, one of PSU’s pioneering professors of music, was a bassoonist for the Portland Symphony Orchestra before even completing his bachelor’s degree. Recruited by Portland State in 1960, Gordon also earned an M.M. at University of Arizona in 1968 and proved to be an outstanding teacher and musician over his 28-year career.

Hired first as a bassoonist instructor and director of bands, Gordon also taught conducting, music education, music history and literature, music theory, and his passion: Latin American music. As a musician, he spent many years as a bassoonist with the symphony, and nearly 40 years with the Portland Opera Orchestra as well as with many chamber ensembles.

Upon retirement, he became an active board member in REEPS (now RAPS), serving as president and receiving the association’s Outstanding Retired Faculty Award in 2000. He serves on RAPS’ History Preservation Committee and has been instrumental in researching and establishing a database on the Music Department’s graduates. As a professor emeritus of music, Gordon’s artistic interests continue to evolve. He has published music for woodwind instruments for 10 years, established Editions VIENTO, a nonprofit organization, and has 250 works published with 20 composers and arrangers in nine countries.

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The story of the beginning of the School of Social Work is, at its heart, the story of the incredible persistence of three women: Katharine Clark, director of Family Counseling Services; Elizabeth Goddard, director of Training, Public Welfare Bureau; and Helen Catlin, of the Boys and Girls Aid Society, who, along with the American Association of Social Workers (later the National Association of Social Workers), campaigned tirelessly from 1932 until the school was finally established in 1960.

Their years of work began to get response from the state in 1958, when the Oregon State System of Higher Education (OSSHE) appointed the Sherbourne Committee to look into the need for a school of social work. In 1959 the Oregon Legislature directed OSSHE to create a graduate school of social work. In June 1960, OSSHE asked Portland State College to prepare a proposal for a graduate school of social work; this the Hoffmann Committee accomplished by September 1960. In January 1961, legislation was passed authorizing funding for the school, and by October 1961 Gordon Hearn had been appointed as its first dean.

When the first class of 20 students was admitted in 1962 there were five faculty members: Rose Thomas, Ruth Stevens, Gordon Hearn, Norris Class, and Frank Miles. Patricia Byrd served as librarian and Virginia Lubkisher was the secretary. Rose Thomas was possibly the first African American woman faculty member tenured at Portland State. The next year Jim Breedlove joined the faculty. Art Emlen began the research thrust of the school with the founding of the Regional Research Institute for Human Services in 1972.

By the third year, students from throughout the country were attracted to the program because PSU did not charge out-of-state tuition. By the time Bernard “Ricky” Ross arrived as the second dean in 1977, the School of Social Work was well established.

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Speech and Hearing gets its start in 1956

The Speech and Hearing Sciences Department has its roots in the Portland Extension Center, which first offered courses in speech-language pathology in 1956, and later in audiology. The early leaders of the Speech and Hearing Sciences Program were Robert English, director; Robert Casteel, clinic director; and James Maurer, head of audiology. Casteel began teaching courses for the center in 1956, followed by English in 1958, Edward Stone in 1964, and Maurer in 1964. In 1956, a deal was worked out with Herold Lillywhite, of Crippled Children’s Division (CCD, now Child Development and Rehabilitation Center), which was affiliated with the University of Oregon medical school (now Oregon Health & Science University). The speech and hearing clinics were run at CCD during the nine-month academic year and later (circa 1964) in the summers in Shattuck Hall at Portland State College (PSC).

Robert English founded the PSC Speech and Hearing Sciences Program in fall 1964. English received a Personnel Preparation federal grant to hire Casteel. At the time, English was finishing his doctorate at the University of Oregon and Casteel was just beginning his doctoral work. The program was under the auspices of the Department of Speech at PSC, which was then chaired by Frank Gibson. The department was housed in the basement of Neuberger Hall, which was only half built. Early growth of the program came about largely because of federal grant funding through the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. During that time, the program had the first of its site visitations for the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association (ASHA) accreditation, which has been maintained continuously since then. Portland State’s was the only accredited program (out of five programs) in Oregon for 30 years. The program became a department in 2005.

—Mary Brannan

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Wrestling has a rich tradition at Portland State. For many years, PSU boasted one of the top wrestling programs in the Pacific Northwest and a powerhouse in the Division II of the NCAA. The team was ably coached for 19 years (1952-71) by Howard Westcott. PSU’s most successful wrestler was Rick Sanders, who wrestled at 115 pounds and led his team to national prominence. As a freshman, Sanders won the NAIA gold, the first of five national freestyle championships. He took a bronze medal in the 1966 World, won the 1967 Pan-Am games, took silver in the 1967 World, and became the first American to win a world championship at his weight. He won the silver in the 1968 and 1972 Olympics. Tragically, he died in an automobile accident after the latter event. Portland State’s wrestling team won the NCAA Division II National Championships in 1969, 1989, and 1990, the latter two anchored by Dan Russell ’91 and coached by Marlin Grahn. Russell was a four-year NCAA Champion and a two-time NCAA Division I All-American. Another well-known Portland State wrestler is All-American Eddie Dahlen, who is now a mixed martial arts fighter. In 1997 the program moved up to Division I of the NCAA along with all of Portland State’s athletic programs. At that time, the wrestling program was accepted into the prestigious Pac-10 conference. Unfortunately for the state of Oregon, the PSU wrestling program was cut at the end of the 2008-09 season.

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Wilma Sheridan was a young teacher in the Portland Public Schools when Portland State College experienced strong growth in numbers of students. John Stehn, head of the Department of Music, contacted Verne Wilson, the supervisor of music in Portland, and asked if there was a music teacher who could teach a class in elementary music methods. Wilson recommended Wilma, and her association with Portland State began.

Within a year, a night class was added, and with Marge Albertson’s retirement, Wilma was invited to join the faculty of Portland State University. When John Trudeau was chosen dean of the College of Liberal Arts, President Joseph Blumel appointed Wilma head of the Music Department. Three benchmarks during her tenure as department head were the addition of the Florestan Trio to the faculty, the establishment of the Piano Recital Series, and the Bachelor of Music degree. She also took advantage of a sabbatical to finish a Ph.D., strengthening her music history background.

In a reorganization of the departments of PSU, the Departments of Art and Architecture, Dance, Music, and Theater Arts became the School of Fine and Performing Arts. Several years into this new organization, John Trudeau retired and Wilma was appointed the first woman dean at PSU. During her career at Portland State, Wilma saw the mission of the departments in Fine and Performing Arts broaden from that of primarily training public school teachers to offering professional preparation for many diverse careers in the arts.

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Joseph Blumel, fondly known to many as Joe, is Portland State University’s longest serving president. During his lengthy tenure, from 1974 to 1986, Joe Blumel led the University through difficult times that included the Vietnam War, student protests and riots on campus (including threats of personal violence), double-digit unemployment, and inflation.

The challenges embedded in an environment marked by retrenchment and financial exigency were perhaps the most difficult for him. He persevered, though, and his policies helped build the foundation from which Portland State would ultimately prosper.

Two of his major contributions were the advancement of PSU to a research university and the fostering of a PSU partnership with the city of Portland in becoming an urban university.

Portland State is now a nationally recognized urban university, and, in 2008, PSU appropriately commemorated Joe’s past achievements by renaming West Hall, the first University-built residence hall under his leadership, the Joseph C. Blumel Residence Hall.

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