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Southern Oregon University: From Normal School to College

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The institution that is now Southern Oregon University serves as a near textbook example of the trials, tribulations, and transformation that normal schools underwent during the first half of the twentieth century. Examination of this case is particularly useful given the frontier nature of its origins mixed with a startling connectivity to the outside world.

The source of the initial attempt to found an institution of higher learning in Ashland, OR is in dispute. McNeal (1973, p. 7) claims that the initial impetus developed from the Quarterly Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church which was held in June of 1869 in Ashland. Kreisman (2002, p. 2) states that this is false since the quarterly conference for that year was held in Roseburg and that newspaper reports record a group of citizens called the “Rogue River Valley Educational Society” had met in April of 1869 to propose the college and that land had already been acquired by June 8 of the same year. After fundraising difficulties and the sale of the land and partially constructed building before it had even opened, the Ashland Academy opened its doors on November 4, 1872 with 151 students enrolled and fully owned and operated by the Rev. J.H. Skidmore who was a graduate of the Greenwich Academy and claimed to have a degree from Wesleyan College. As opposed to the strictness of later years, the curriculum was flexible and students could enter and leave at anytime, only paying tuition for the time they spent in the academy (Kreisman, 2002, p. 9). The Academy closed in 1878 after losing a contract for public instruction from the city of Ashland.

In typical rapid-fire movement for the time, the academy was then sold to the Methodist Episcopal Conference by August of the same year after subscriptions for \$3,700 were raised. The academy re-opened under the name of “Ashland Academy and

Commercial College” and was advertised as “‘under the supervision of an Evangelical Christian Church’ but not ‘sectarian’ in any ‘objectionable sense’,” and unlike the prior incarnations, tuition was requested in advance. (Kreisman, 2002, p. 12).

The institution continued through 1890 when the now state chartered “Ashland State Normal School” closed for the last time under local Methodist control and the land reverted back to the previous owner. The idea was not dead though, and after several failed attempts Southern Oregon State Normal School was established under the 1882 state charter. Methodist control persisted until 1899 when state funding was obtained and the deed was passed to the state in exchange. For the next ten years, Southern Oregon State Normal School would continue with state funding and state control. In 1909 however the state legislature failed to pass an appropriation for the state’s three normal schools and they all closed their doors. This begins what Billings (1958) describes in his memoir as “the dark years”.

Homer Billings documents the efforts that he and a number of other Ashland residents undertook in order to re-establish the Normal School in Ashland. He describes a 16 year long campaign that involved multiple failed state referendums, lobbying the legislature, and what we would now consider to be modern political methods to re-establish higher education in Ashland. What he did not know is that the final result of his efforts would not be just a normal school, but rather the beginnings of the movement away from teacher education into a full-fledged college.

In 1925, long term State Senator George W. Dunn, the son of one of the original settlers in the Rogue Valley finally managed to strong-arm a bill through the state legislature that re-established funding for the Southern Oregon State Normal School as

well as the Eastern Oregon State Normal School (Now Eastern Oregon University). The reorganized normal school was opened on June 21, 1926 with J.A. Churchill, formerly the state superintendent of public instruction was named president.

Churchill was set with an enormous task. His first duties were to oversee the construction of a new building to replace the neglected Old Normal School building, design a curriculum, hire a faculty administrative staff, recruit students, and re-acquire a library to compliment the books that had been held in trust by the Ashland Public Library. When SOSNS opened in June of 1926 Churchill had acquired a faculty of 22, instituted the quarter system and managed to recruit 173 students which he raised by an additional 100 for a total of 273 in the first fall quarter.

Churchill believed strongly in a prescribed curriculum however he did allow students to choose between primary or intermediate methods so that they could specialize in the lower or upper grades when they began teaching. Churchill was also strongly opposed to the then emerging trend of academic departments. He believed that they would lead to specialization of faculty and neglect of the overall mission of teacher education. Churchill also knew that if the re-established institution were to survive, it would need high academic standards. For the first time, SOSNS would require a high school education or the equivalent for entry into the school, and after soliciting responses from the employers of the first wave of graduates, Churchill also required a minimum first year GPA of 3.0 in order to continue with the program. All of this, despite the fact that at the time the faculty held no PhDs and only six held master's degrees.

Julius Churchill arrived at SOSNS as an established educator and he was determined to leave his imprint on the newly re-constituted institution. At one point

during his tenure, he was quoted as telling a psychology instructor “The personality of a president should put its stamp on the institution” (Kreisman, 2002, p. 60). This was certainly true of Churchill. He selected the school colors, and established an athletics department to raise school spirit. He also mandated the establishment of a school newspaper. In his second year as president, Churchill banned students from drinking on or off campus and banned all smoking on campus.

Unhindered by a faculty senate (one wouldn't be established until the late 1940s) and with all of the instructors reporting directly to him, Churchill was free to adjust the curriculum and prescribe course loads as he wished. Churchill changed the mission in 1931 to include junior college instruction and night classes for the “citizens of the valley” (Kreisman, 2002, p. 61). The power of Churchill's presidency was unchallenged. At one point, a senior instructor returned from sabbatical with a beard. Churchill made the comment that he felt like the instructor needed a bath every time he walked in the room because of it. At this point, the entire faculty began to point and laugh at the beard every time they saw it. The senior instructor promptly shaved it off. Churchill was also strong-willed away from the university. At one point, when faced with budget cuts, Churchill railed at the state board of higher education and began quoting fire and brimstone bible verses in order to spare his school and faculty from them.

Whether by Churchill's choice or necessity it is unknown but SOSNS opened as a co-educational and integrated institution (although only one African-American Student had attended during the early years). The student population had a majority female enrollment until the passage of the GI Bill in 1944. Churchill immediately recognized the nature of his new student body and in his first year as president, he requested money

for the construction of a women's dormitory. This request became perennial, with state denials occurring every year until 1947, after the construction of family housing units for married veterans and a single male veteran's dormitory had been completed.

Churchill's curriculum, while prescribed, was also relatively modern with courses covering the newly emerging fields of sociology and psychology as well as an early attempt at the sociology of education. The curriculum consisted of two sections, a general education section and a professional education section for a total of 96 credits to be taken over the course of six quarters. Students in the general subjects were then tested at the end of each quarter and those with deficiencies were mandated to attend courses during the summer quarter if they wished to continue. The addition of the junior college function in 1931 marked the first clear beginnings of the institution's transition to college status, however Churchill would not be the one to shepherd it in, that duty was up to Walter Redford.

Redford assumed the presidency of SONS at the end of the 1931-1932 school year after Churchill left to head the Oregon Teachers College in Monmouth. Redford was an instructor of Geography at the School. Redford was tasked with continuing Churchill's success, however he found himself taking over an institution with trouble on the horizon. The faculty had joined the AAUP a year earlier and were now collectively bargaining for their contracts, in addition, the throes of the great depression had stripped much of the state funding and with WWII looming, enrollments would decline dramatically.

Redford's first years consisted of following through with many of Churchill's plans: The construction of a new library, the addition of more classroom space, and the

perennial request for funding to construct a women's dormitory. Redford's first struggle came with the placement of the university on probationary accreditation due to the size of the library and the training of the faculty. Within a few years, Redford as well as several other faculty completed their PhD's and full accreditation by the American Association of Teachers Colleges was restored.

Redford is also the primary force behind the transition to a full-scale college. In 1934 as part of an attempt to boost sagging enrollments, Redford added 50 new course offerings to the junior college program, including the first foreign language courses in French and German. This led to another name change and SONS became Southern Oregon College of Education in 1939 with the right to grant Bachelor's degrees in Elementary Education. With the war effort ramping up and the establishment of nearby Camp White, Redford obtained federal funding to start a civil aeronautics program to train airplane pilots. This program was short lived though, and enrollment at the normal school began to decline precipitously.

Redford continued to push for the establishment of the liberal arts and sciences degrees, however due to pressure from Oregon State University (the state's land-grant institution) and the University of Oregon who did not wish to see any more competition, Redford was forced to hide these programs as part of the "General Studies" curriculum. His final accomplishment on the transition was obtaining full accreditation from the Northwest Association of Colleges and Schools as a degree granting institution in 1942. Redford would be unable to overcome this pressure and eventually retired in 1946.

Redford was succeeded by Elmo Stevenson. Stevenson was dedicated to completion of the transition that Redford had started 12 years prior as well as to

increasing enrollments. Given a mandate from the state board to either “make it or break it” Stevenson seemed to revive the spirit of Churchill and reorganized the entire college. He established the three major schools that now currently exist, established academic departments and faculty ranks. He organized a faculty senate and established many of the majors that currently exist today, including majors in the liberal arts curriculum. He also strongly encouraged faculty without doctorates to earn them quickly. With the influx of veterans from the war with G.I. Bill aid, Stevenson seized the opportunity and acquired funding for a veterans dormitory as well as family housing units for married veterans. He mandated an 8AM – 5PM workday for faculty, encouraged service to the community, set standard course loads at 15-16 credits, and required formal dress for faculty members while on campus. In a seemingly fitting gesture, Stevenson also renamed the administration building Churchill Hall.

The transition from Normal School to college was not an easy one for SOU. With pressure from larger and more established universities and tight state funding, the fledgling institution required larger events to push it along. It is doubtful, even with the force of will exerted by Churchill, Redford, and Stevenson, that the university would have been anything more than a teachers college had not the enrollment crises and then boom related to WWII occurred. The overflowing of classrooms at the larger institutions relieved the worries of competition and filled the state coffers just long enough to allow the transition to happen. Even with the rapid changes brought about by the GI Bill and WWII, the vestiges of Churchill, Redford, and Stevenson still remain. The president is still relatively powerful, the faculty still teach high course loads, although not 16 credits and regularly volunteer in the community, and the quarter system still exists. Night

courses still continue “for the benefit of the citizens of the valley”. Significant changes have occurred also, Susanne Homes Hall (the women’s dormitory) is now co-ed and I spent three years of my life living within its confines, Stevenson’s dress code has since been removed and some faculty even teach in jeans. The university is now known more for its Fine Arts, Liberal Arts, and Theater programs than for its education program, although education is still one of the largest majors. Perhaps the most ironic change is that there is an ash tray at each of the exterior doors of Churchill Hall.

References

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