

20th Anniversary Interview with Founding President Joe Cosand

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Joe Cosand is still introduced around the country as the man who founded the St. Louis Community College District. But he's also known as an early leader in the California community college movement, as the former U.S. Deputy Commissioner of Higher Education, and as a concerned university professor who cares deeply about his students and colleagues.

A lot of people have stories about Dr. Cosand – about his influence in their careers, or about his tremendous kindness, generosity and leadership.

In St. Louis, he is remembered with the special fondness that is reserved for founding presidents. St. Louis Community College celebrated its 20th anniversary this year by honoring Dr. Cosand. The College's Administrative Center is now named the Joseph P. Cosand Administrative Center.

Dr. Cosand was stunned at the honor. "The privilege of being the founding president of the College was more than enough honor in itself," he said. "The nine years I served as president will always be the most satisfying professional years of my life. I will treasure this above all other rewards throughout the rest of my life, and it will become a heritage for our son and his children."

Dr. Cosand talked recently about those early days in St. Louis, about the joys and problems, and about the tremendous challenge of building a college.

The Founding Years with Joe Cosand

Twenty years have passed since Joe Cosand came to St. Louis to start a community college. But he still remembers that first day on the job, when the college existed as little more than a rented office in downtown St. Louis, staffed by a part-time secretary.

A far cry from the three-campus junior college district, which celebrated its 20th anniversary April 3, with a student enrollment topping 30,000.

Dr. Cosand remembers the exhilaration, as well as the doubts, as he reminisces from his San Juan Island home in Puget Sound.

"The Board had rented two small rooms on the fifth floor in downtown St. Louis," he recalled. "I walked in and there was a woman who had been serving as a part-time secretary, and she said, 'I thought somebody ought to be here to meet you.'"

“That’s when I asked myself, as I looked out the window at the city of St. Louis, ‘Joe, what are you doing here? What do you do to service a community of about a million-and-a-half people who don’t know what a comprehensive community college is?’”

Dr. Cosand’s first board of trustees meeting later that day remains a special memory – it was also the occasion of his 25th wedding anniversary with his wife, Kay. The Board surprised him by calling a recess and bringing in Mrs. Cosand and a bottle of champagne.

“So it was a wonderful beginning,” Dr. Cosand added. “I was all by myself with six board members in a state where they’d never had a community college ... it was virgin territory.”

Dr. Cosand was quick to stake his claim. Six educators were recruited to form a core staff to make decisions about curriculum and where classes would be held. Time was of essence that September of 1962. The Board wanted classes to open the first week of February for the winter semester.

Six people worked with Dr. Cosand to meet the deadline: Dr. John E. Tirrill as vice president for instruction; James W. Hobson, as vice president for administration; Glynn E. Clark, who was to be the first campus president; and Vince Freeman, as the first registrar.

The two remaining people on the core staff were recruited from California: the late Dr. Bob Jones, who was to build the library facilities; and his right-hand person, Ruthe S. Erickson.

“We held meetings in motel rooms where Jack and Jim were residing and we tried to develop a program to build a junior college district,” Dr. Cosand remembers. “It was great, great fun. I’ve said to many people, if you ever get that opportunity, don’t ever turn it down. It’s a great privilege.”

Curriculum was a big question for Dr. Cosand and the core staff. Missourians were unfamiliar with community colleges which incorporated career and technical programs with academic programs. Their only comparison was Harris Junior College, part of Harris Teacher’s College, which had a small enrollment of about 750 students, with academic programs only.

Thus the Board was stunned when Dr. Cosand forecast a 10-year enrollment figure of 20,000 to 25,000 for the new junior college district.

Vital to that success would be the “open door” policy which the Board had adopted, which would allow anyone 18 years or older to enroll in the college, regardless of educational background.

“We developed a relatively simple academic curriculum and a remedial program – but we didn’t use the word remedial,” Dr. Cosand said. “I found out that remedial was a dirty word in St. Louis – so we called it a developmental program.”

Dr. Cosand also recommended that advisory committee representing business, industry, labor, government, the professions, women's organizations and new organizations be formed to make suggestions on what career programs were needed in the St. Louis area.

Top-level executives and leaders from each of these groups formed the first advisory committee to develop the groundwork for the basic goals and directions for the career programs.

Four sub-umbrella committees were then formed of second- and third-level executives and managers in the areas of health services, business services, engineering technology and public services. Their task was to take the recommendations of the top group and formulate more definitive plans.

Finally, an individual advisory committee was set up for each career field to develop the curriculum and decide the caliber and experience needed for the faculty members.

"From the beginning we did everything we could to avoid conflict between academic and career programs," Dr. Cosand added. "We felt there was no difference in importance, and therefore, there should be no difference in status."

Classes opened on time the first week of February at two local high schools, McCluer and Roosevelt. But Dr. Cosand and the Board were already thinking of building campuses – not just one campus, but three campuses to service all of St. Louis City and County.

"One approach was to build one large campus and have the students come from all over the city and county to that campus," explained Dr. Cosand. "Another approach was to build a campus, and when it filled up, to build another one, and when it filled up, to build another."

"But we felt very strongly that when you do that, you really don't serve the whole district equally for a long time. So after a great deal of argument, discussion and cogitation, we decided to do what had never been done before – to build three campuses at the same time so people from throughout the district would have access to a college relatively close to where they lived."

Was he apprehensive about taking such a big step?

"Well, we had a great board, and Mrs. Bastian (one of the charter board members) had a philosophy, and it was a good one – 'it is certain because it is impossible.'

"The gamble was well worth taking because we were trying to overcome any feeling that a certain section of the district wasn't being taken care of," Dr. Cosand said.

The next question was how to gather support for a bond issue to build the three campuses. Again, the Board elicited the support of the business community with John Fox, then president

of Mercantile Trust, spearheading an advisory committee which determined that \$47.2 million was needed – the largest bond issue ever for a community college.

Dr. Cosand went to Civic Progress, an organization of top businessmen and leaders in the St. Louis area, for help.

“I’ll never forget it,” Dr. Cosand said. “I had 15 minutes to make a presentation, and then was excused.”

The verdict was favorable. Civic Progress pledged their full support behind the bond issue and promised the college district \$75,000 to run the bond campaign, plus another \$75,000 in membership assessments, for a grand total of \$150,000.

Civic Progress also provided a chairman for the campaign, the late Dr. Charles Allen Thomas, then vice president of Monsanto Company, and a treasurer, Harry Harrington, the president of Boatman’s Bank.

“We were told from the beginning that it was impossible,” Dr. Cosand recalls. “People said St. Louis is too conservative to pass that kind of a bond issue.”

He remembers the tireless efforts of men such as Oscar Ehrhardt, who garnered support from the labor community; Al Fleishman of Fleishman-Hillard; and Dr. Thomas, who visited every school in the junior college district to tell students about the importance of the bond issue.

Even the media were united in support. “We used to say that the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and Globe-Democrat never agreed on anything except two things – the sewer district and the junior college district,” Dr. Cosand laughed.

Today, Dr. Cosand looks back on his accomplishments in St. Louis with modesty, preferring to shift the credit to the first charter board – “probably the finest board that could have ever been put together” – and his early staff.

He does, however, see a few areas where he might have acted differently, give the knowledge then that he has now.

For example, population surveys in the 1960s projected a large population growth in the city of St. Louis of up to 900,000. Thus the College’s city campus, Forest Park, was built as the largest campus, in terms of space, as compared to the two county campuses, Florissant Valley and Meramec.

Instead, city population has decreased since the 1960s to about 500,000, and the county campuses are increasingly in need of more space.

“The projections were wrong, but they were the best we had at the time,” Dr. Cosand explained. “If we had to do it over again and had the same data, we’d probably do the same thing.”

However, he has no qualms about the early decision to charge tuition instead of following the California practice of free tuition.

“There was a feeling that students would take their education more seriously if they had to pay part of their costs,” Dr. Cosand said. “Having come from California, I had some difficulty with that because I had believed very strongly in the idea of no tuition.

“But those of us who came from California and went to other parts of the country where they had tuition have all changed our minds and agreed that tuition is a good thing if it is not too high.”

Dr. Cosand guided the St. Louis Community College District for nine years before he accepted the new challenge of becoming the director of the University of Michigan’s Center for the Study of Higher Education from 1971 to 1976. He was also Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education in the United States Office of Education in Washington D.C. from 1972 to 1973.

“I felt very strongly that I had probably done what I had been brought to St. Louis to do,” he said in retrospect. “We had built three colleges; we had met our 25,000 student goal; and we had a national reputation that at the time probably was the finest in the United States.

“For many years I thought I wanted to wind up my career as a university professor,” he added, “to bring to students what I had learned.”

Indeed, his philosophy for an educator, as listed at the end of his accomplishments in “Who’s Who in America,” reads: “Far better than sharing our riches with others is to reveal their riches to themselves.

Dr. Cosand “retired” in the summer of 1980, but is still active in education as a consultant and teacher. He is also on the Board of Directors of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges; was former board chairman and director of the American Council on Education; and a charter member of the Coordinating Council for Higher Education.

He has served on numerous advisory councils and commissions; is former director of the American Association for Higher Education; and has been active with the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, and the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.