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THE BUSINESS JOURNAL OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS
Published Bi-Weekly

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September 17, 2007 Edition

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STCC at 40: A Case of Institutional Advancement

By *GEORGE O'BRIEN*



Much has changed on the campus of Springfield Technical Community College since the school opened on the grounds of the Springfield Armory in 1967. But the school's basic mission — preparing students for the workplace and thus improving the health and vitality of the region's economy — hasn't. As the school turns 40, it looks back on a proud track record of blending imagination and perseverance to meet that mission, but, as always, the focus is on the future.

Faye-Marie Bartlett remembers that first semester.

It was the fall of 1967, and the Springfield Technical Institute, to be known a year later as Springfield Technical Community College, was open for business — with open being the operative word.

The school had assumed several of the buildings that comprised the Springfield Armory, the closing of which had been announced in 1964, but decommissioning was still in progress when classes started that September. Bartlett, who would go on to teach Nursing and other health programs at STCC for 22 years, remembers that classrooms were created "wherever they could put them," which meant, in most cases, large, open spaces once used for gun manufacturing.

"They put in new floors," she recalled, "but there were no walls."

School staff, faculty, and administrators pitched in to erect partitions, she continued, but they certainly didn't reach the 20-foot ceilings. Baffles were hung in an attempt to contain noise, but there was a sizable gap between the top of the partitions and the bottom of the baffles. All this made for

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some colorful anecdotes that live on 40 years later.

"I was teaching Growth and Development," Bartlett recalled. "The person next door was teaching Anatomy and Physiology. Across the hall, which wasn't really a hall, just part of the room, someone was teaching Biology. You could hear it all; I like to say that you could get three classes for the price of one."

In Growth and Development, said Bartlett, students learn about the birth and early development of humans. Her tales from 1967 provide some first-hand insight into how this unique institution was born and how it developed. Then, and throughout its 40-year history, Bartlett and others told BusinessWest, the school has used imagination and determination to overcome challenges and meet its mission.

Along the way, it has forged a reputation as one of the leaders among the state's 15 community colleges in career programs. In recent years, the school has won national and even international acclaim for a technology park it created across the street from the main campus in former Armory buildings later used by General Electric and then Digital. The park, which has won national awards in the realm of economic development, is now home to more than a dozen businesses which together employ nearly 1,000 people.

While there are many individuals who played key roles in the creation, growth, and evolution of the college, much of the credit is given to two visionaries: Edmond Garvey and Andrew Scibelli.

It was Garvey, a former Naval officer who, as principal of the former Trade (now Putnam) High School, saw a need for a post-graduate program that would become STI, worked with local and state officials to relocate the program into the Armory, and led the college through its formative years.

And it was Scibelli, who started at the school as a Biology teacher, who would eventually take it to the next level in terms of programs, facilities, reputation, visibility, and community involvement. "He opened up those gates," said Brian Corridan, who served the school as trustee for 10 years (seven as chairman) and has led the organization administering the technology park for the past 11, referring to the massive iron fencing, crafted from melted-down cannons that surround the campus.

Scibelli is credited not only with putting the college on the map, but also for fostering leadership and sense of entrepreneurship among those who worked beside him: four of his former vice presidents are now leading their own community colleges.

That entrepreneurial spirit remains today, said current President Ira Rubenzahl, who told BusinessWest that the school remains diligent in its work to determine and then meet the needs of its students, the region, and the local business community, which is its true mission.

Moving forward, the college — which has launched a major

gifts campaign to mark its 40th anniversary and will celebrate the milestone with a gala for past and present trustees, faculty, and staff — is also taking part in national, multi-year initiative called Achieving the Dream. In simple terms, the program is focused on helping community college students meet their goals — whatever they may be, meaning specific courses, certificate programs, degrees, transfer, or job opportunities.

“We want more people to finish what they start,” said Rubenzahl, noting that, nationally, too many students leave community colleges without meeting their goals, and in doing so, risk losing out on employment opportunities and also add to the challenges facing business sectors struggling to find qualified workers.

“This isn’t a feel-good thing,” he said. “The foundations funding this believe that the American workforce is not going to be competitive if we don’t educate more individuals, because the jobs require education, and they see the community colleges as the place where that needs to happen.”

In this issue, BusinessWest looks back at STCC’s first 40 years, and ahead, to what might come next for the college that is making history at an already historic site.

Taking Their Best Shot

Scibelli has his own stories from the college’s early years.

He remembers teaching Microbiology in 1969 in the facility known then and now as Building 20. His classroom was carved out of space that was formerly a machine shop. There was plenty of room, but only 12 outlets for 33 microscopes. “So we shared — people worked in teams,” he recalled. “We just did whatever we had to do.”

Like Bartlett, Scibelli said the exercises in overcoming adversity provided some good lessons for those first students in imagination and perseverance. They also created a sense of family among faculty and staff, one strong enough to compel many individuals, including Scibelli, to stay with the school for the balance of their professional careers.

“There was a strong sense of unity that came from doing everything together,” he remembers. “There were many days when you would teach a class and then go help put up a wall someplace. We all felt we were building something special.”

Tracing the history of the college, its creation was prompted by a blend of need and circumstance, specifically the decommissioning of the Armory, the location of which was chosen by George Washington. It was the Armory, which employed more than 13,000 people during World War II, that gave the region not only jobs, but the foundation upon which much of the precision manufacturing base that gave the region its industrial identity was built.

Springfield Mayor Charles Ryan, who, remarkably, was also in the corner office when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced that the Armory would close, told BusinessWest

that he and others fought a spirited year-and-a-half-long fight to reverse that decision — and at one point thought they had the battle won.

“But then, they changed the ground rules on us,” he said, noting that even after city leaders effectively stated a solid case for continued need for the Armory, McNamara stuck to his guns, figuratively speaking, and by early 1966 city and state leaders conceded that the closing was inevitable.

It was then — or, by some accounts, years if not decades earlier — that people started thinking about creating a college at the site, especially the west side of Federal Street, with its long brick buildings and large courtyard, used for drilling and parades when the Armory was open.

Among those doing such thinking were Ryan and Garvey, who both saw a need to expand STI — which was launched in 1964 and was soon being flooded with more applications than it could handle — and considered the Armory a natural fit.

But that proposal didn't appeal to everyone. Some thought the Armory buildings should be used for industry and to yield much-needed tax revenue — and the buildings on the east side of Federal Street would serve both purposes, first as home to General Electric facilities, then Milton Bradley operations, and later a manufacturing center for Digital Equipment Corp. Meanwhile, others believed there wasn't need for another two-year college, what with Holyoke Community College only 10 miles away.

Those advocating for the college eventually prevailed, and, from Ryan's perspective, largely because of the strong case Garvey built for what would become the state's first (and still only) technical community college.

“Ed Garvey was a genius,” Ryan recalled. “He believed that if he could keep students for an extra year, he could guarantee that they'd get a job when they graduated. That's how the post-graduate program that would become STI got started.”

It was initially funded mostly by the city, the mayor continued, but it became clear that the community didn't have the resources needed to take STI where Garvey wanted it to go. Working with state Rep. Anthony Scibelli, Gov. John Volpe, and industrialist Joseph Deliso Sr., Garvey and Ryan made STI a state institution, one with an historic street address.

Both Bartlett and Scibelli credited Garvey with possessing the vision and leadership skills needed to guide the school through those early years and put it on a solid foundation.

“He was a true visionary, and he was my mentor,” said Scibelli, who served Garvey as faculty member and registrar.

Said Bartlett, “he (Garvey) was very visible and very much involved in what was happening. Some presidents rarely get out of their offices, but he was always out, talking with students and faculty, and listening to what they were saying.”

Down to a Science

Garvey retired in 1974, to be succeeded by Robert Geitz, an Engineering professor at the school who served until 1981. Leonard Collamore, a History professor at the college, served as interim during a prolonged search for a president that ended with Scibelli getting the nod.

And it is Scibelli who is credited with making STCC a more respected name within academia, and especially the community it serves, and, in the process, increasing enrollment.

"Some people called it the 'high school on the hill,' and I bristled whenever I heard that," Scibelli recalled. "I was determined to make the school's reputation worthy of what I knew was going on inside those gates."

He was able to do so, said Corridan, thanks to a combination of his own leadership skills, a strong board of trustees, and administrative teams that believed in the school and its role within the community, and wanted to expand that role.

"We explored various relationships, not only with the community immediately around us as to how we could fill voids, but also with those in certain industries," he explained. "We asked them to tell us what they needed, and we would devise programs around that."

He cited programs involving IBM, Ford Motor Co., and other major corporations to train potential employees as examples of how the school progressed during what he called its "transformative years." Locally, the college worked (and continues to work) with health care providers to meet their needs in terms of both a pipeline of workers for several fields and making sure those workers have the requisite skills needed to succeed.

"We made sure that the college was going in the direction it was intended to go," Corridan explained, "but to continue to raise the bar constantly, both locally and nationally, to meet a mission and not just be a glorified technical high school."

Ray Di Pasquale, who served the college in a variety of positions, the last being vice president of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, is one of the four who worked with and for Scibelli to move on to become a school's president — in his case, the Community College of Rhode Island. He credited Scibelli with giving administrators opportunities to excel, thus enabling them to grow professionally while also taking the college to a higher plane.

"He allowed all of us to do our jobs ... he made us part of a team," said Di Pasquale. "We all did our jobs well, whether it was getting enrollment up or getting the message out about the school. We did a lot of neat stuff, and we got very involved in the city, which is very important."

Elaborating, Di Pasquale said Scibelli opened the school's gates and doors to the community, making it a resource, while also involving elected officials and business leaders on advisory boards and with decision-making.

"Andy saw the wisdom of expanding our horizons and getting outsiders involved," he continued. "That brought additional dollars to the school, and by opening those gates to others and welcoming new ideas, he made the college stronger."

This is a management style Di Pasquale said he is trying to emulate at CCRI, where he is building partnerships with business leaders and becoming heavily involved with economic development initiatives.

Technically Speaking

During Scibelli's tenure, imagination was needed not to shape classrooms out of factory space, but to often continue programs and initiatives — and cultivate new ones — at a time of frequent budget turmoil and inconsistent support from the Commonwealth.

There was one period of severe cutbacks and even budget remissions — when money is allocated and then actually pulled back — in the late '80s, another in the early '90s, and other, less severe episodes in the early '80s and again this decade, said Scibelli, adding that the college responded by becoming, in his mind, entrepreneurial.

"We started thinking like a business," he said, adding that the school's administrators began looking at new and different ways to find money, or generate revenue, rather than merely reduce expenses.

One of these methods was a heightened focus on grant-writing, an initiative that would yield some high-profile awards from the National Science Foundation and other groups and, ultimately, less reliance on state funding for the college's health and well-being.

Among those grants is one from Verizon, now beyond \$16 million, for the so-called Next Step Program, a New England-wide initiative to train the company's workers through a curriculum of telecommunications technology. STCC serves as the lead school in a network of community colleges for five New England states to offer the training. Another is an NSF grant, now totaling more than \$10 million, for the National Center for Telecommunications Technology (NCTT), which, as the name suggests, is an advanced technological education center to develop and pilot telecommunications and related science and math courses in high schools, community colleges, and baccalaureate-degree colleges.

The entrepreneurial thinking took on an even more literal bent in the early '90s, when, after Digital announced it would close its Springfield plant, the college let known its intention to purchase the property and create a business park. No community college had ever embarked on such an effort, and there were many in Springfield who didn't want STCC to take that route.

"It had never been done before, and it hasn't been done since, at least by a community college," said Corridan, who leads the assistance corporation that operates the park. "It was a bold step, and there was a lot of risk involved. The college didn't

have to take that step; it was already doing well and filling its role in the community, but it wanted to take that role to a much higher level.”

The park, which would later include incubator space and entrepreneurial programming housed in a building to become known as the Andrew M. Scibelli Enterprise Center, opened in 1996. This was when the technology sector was witnessing rapid and profound expansion, and soon the facility was filled with regional and national technology-based companies.

The bursting of the dot-com bubble earlier this decade and ongoing consolidation of many aspects of the tech sector have created some vacancies and a new set of challenges for park administrators, said Corridan, who told BusinessWest that the team is already exploring some imaginative options.

Keeping the technology park filled — and vibrant — is one of the priorities for the school and the assistance corporation moving forward, said Rubenzahl, adding that a long-term strategic plan calls for ongoing partnerships with community and business leaders to ensure that students are graduating with the skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly technology-based economy.

He cited an agreement signed just last month by the college, the local chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Assoc., and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County as just one example. The memorandum of understanding includes new courses and a new certificate program, among other things, that are designed to draw more people into the field and increase the skill levels of those already in it.

“It’s an important initiative,” said Rubenzahl, adding that there are hundreds of vacancies in the precision machining sector that are going unfilled, resulting in millions of dollars in work that must be turned down by area shops. Work to close that gap is just one of the steps the college is taking to help bolster the local economy.

Involvement with Achieving the Dream, from a long-term perspective, is another.

A privately funded initiative launched in 2004 that involves several local and national foundations, Achieving the Dream is the centerpiece of the school’s current strategic plan, he explained, and it has important implications for the college and the community.

“We want to make sure that all of our students are successful in meeting their goals,” he said. “Their goal may not be to graduate; it may be to take some courses, or get a certificate, or to transfer. We know that, across the country, community colleges, because they’re open-admission, often see students struggle to be successful; this a long-term, in-depth program to improve community college success.”

Elaborating, he said that in this, the first year of STCC’s involvement, there will be close examination of data concerning course-completion rates, retention, graduation rates, and other indices, with close attention paid to how

various sub-groups — defined by gender, income, and ethnicity, for example — fare when compared to the whole.

From there, the school will work to identify gaps and close them.

“The key is to take a look at the data we’ve gathered and say, ‘where is there room for improvement, and how do we attack this issue?’” he explained, adding that, broadly speaking, this is what the school has been doing since the doors opened in 1967.

A Class Act

Bartlett remembers when the Nursing program got off the ground in 1969. There were 45 students enrolled in that first class, and they couldn’t all fit in a classroom created in a building, more like a house, that once served as officers’ quarters at the Armory.

So program administrators improvised, and used space in another, nearby building, formerly the officers club. Bartlett remembers wheeling a blackboard back and forth between the two facilities countless times in those early days. Like other, often extraordinary steps taken to get the job done, she says the blackboard-rolling exploits helped build camaraderie and steel administrators and faculty members for the many challenges still to come.

“We made a game out of it,” she recalled. “Any obstacle we faced we just took it on and found a way to overcome; we knew that someday, things would be better. It’s the same today, and everyone can see that things have gotten better.

Much better.

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