

The Creation of the Houston Community College: A Concept Becomes Reality

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The Educational Milieu

The community college is a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of education. Community colleges emerged as an alternative to traditional post-secondary education, which was typically reserved for the academically and socially elite. Originally designed to serve local educational and social needs, *most community colleges still function primarily to support and to benefit the local community.* Going beyond strictly vocational/technical education, the community college, post-1970, represents recreational and cultural opportunities for the general populace.

The terms "community" and "junior" college are often used synonymously to refer to a two-year institution of higher education, generally public, offering instruction, and adapted in content level and schedule to the needs of the community in which it is located. Such institutions are supported in whole or in part by state funding, and in Texas they must be officially created and recognized by the Coordinating Board of Texas. Their key focus is on community needs, either real or perceived, as summarized by James Gallatscheck in his book, *College Leadership for Community Renewal*:

The deterioration of our communities . . . the obsolescence of individuals and social organizations, and the increasing number of citizens with educational needs beyond the purview of existing colleges demand a new kind of post-secondary institution . . . [which] must be linked to the community in such a manner that it determines its direction and develops its goals through college-community interaction . . . [and] provides a vehicle through which the community educates itself . . .¹

At one time, Houston had had a junior college system. The Houston Junior College, founded in 1927 under the direction of Superintendent Edison E.

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¹James F. Gallatscheck, *College Leadership for Community Renewal* (San Francisco, 1976), 6.

Oberholtzer, remained as such until 1934 when it added a junior-senior level, effectively making it a four year institution. In 1963, following several additional expansions, the organizational structure became formally recognized as the University of Houston.² Also in 1927, the Houston Junior College for Negroes was founded. It existed as a so-called "separate but equal" correlate institution to the Houston Junior College for white students until 1947, when it became known as the Texas State University for Negroes, eventually becoming Texas Southern University.³ With the junior colleges absorbed into traditional university structures, Houston had no comprehensive community college of its own — not until the creation of the Houston Community College.

Houston in the mid-1960s was becoming famous as one of the South's "boom-towns." The petroleum industry had burgeoned into a major economic force, and the subsequent requirements for a labor supply projected a steady increase in population. The "Sunbelt" climate of the area was also favorable to an influx of other related industries. Training and formal education for jobs in these areas would be required. Although the Harris County area had several institutions which could provide such services, Houston itself had no educational entity to provide training for a locally expanding high-tech labor force. Community leaders in Houston thus felt the need for a community college.

The Initial Attempt

By early 1967, the Coordinating Board of Texas was in the process of drawing up a Master Plan. The Master Plan was designed to set up the long-range goals and objectives for Texas in terms both of educational needs and of resources available to accomplish them.⁴ Much of the data used as the basis for this plan was obtained from local Texas school districts. The Board's findings indicated a distinct shortage of available junior college districts in some of the major metropolitan areas of Texas, notably in Austin, El Paso and Houston. The Coordinating Board recommended that these cities remedy the deficit.

In the same year, 1967, a movement in response to this deficit was underway in Houston. The Greater Houston Metropolitan Council and the Houston Community/Junior College Commission began a joint venture; led by Super-

²Patrick J. Nicholson, *In Time* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1977), 31.

³William E. Terry, "Origin and Development of Texas Southern University, Houston, Texas" (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 1968).

⁴Thomas Hatfield, Director of Continuing Education, interview with author, February 26, 1982.

intendent H. M. Landrum of Spring Branch, the two groups proposed the creation of a community college district which would serve the Houston metropolitan area. In 1968, the proposal was put to a vote by the residents of Harris County, but they rejected it by a vote of 31,515 to 28,219.⁵

The 1968 attempt at the creation of a metropolitan community college was defeated for a number of reasons. In going beyond Houston Independent School District boundaries, its proponents ran into significant opposition from other local educators who perceived it as competition. Also, the western area of Harris County, including the Spring Branch-Memorial residents, were hesitant to align themselves with the community college concept. These residents were resistant to the tax base which would be necessary to support such an endeavor. Since children of this area typically attended more traditional colleges, the voting populace believed that a community college would not serve their needs. Overall, the biggest obstacle to the 1968 proposal was probably a financial one. A major factor for the defeat hinged on the issue of a tax increase needed to create and maintain the community college. Voters defeated a 65¢ tax levy by 33,611 to 22,471; they also defeated a \$75 million bond issue by 33,443 to 23,263.⁶ Yet the effort was not entirely a loss, although the proposal went down to defeat. It forced educational leaders to review and reorganize strategy on behalf of a Houston community college.

A Changing Climate

While proponents considered a reorganization attempt, other factors in Houston provided impetus and direction for a more successful effort. The second attempt to establish a community college in Houston commenced with a needs assessment survey, undertaken by the Houston Independent School District. Results of the 1970 survey showed that of almost 165,000 Houstonians aged 18-24, only 24% were attending a college or university.⁷ Additionally, almost 70% of all jobs available in the area required at least some post-secondary training.⁸ Community need was glaringly evident. Since funding had been a major deterrent to the original proposal, the 1970 survey results suggested that a community college be created without incurring any additional tax increase for the citizens. This possibility was made more likely early in 1971, when in order to remedy educational shortages in a financially expedient manner, the Coordinating Board and the Texas legislature agreed

⁵Houston Post, September 29, 1968.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Memorandum, Travis Broesche to Speakers on Behalf of Community College Proposal, May 1970, files of J. B. Whiteley, President's office, Houston Community College System.

⁸*Ibid.*

to approve the creation of a community college in El Paso *without* an independent tax base to support it. Funding would come solely through state appropriations and student tuition. Section 51.011 of the Texas Education Code provided such authority, based on assessed property valuation and average daily attendance.⁹ Senator Joe Christie of El Paso was the major proponent of the endeavor. Once the precedent had been established, the largest obstacle to a community college in Houston had been cleared. Advocates of a Houston community college began to act.

Despite obvious progress, a great deal of active resistance remained on the part of a number of community leaders and their supporters in the Houston area. As it happened, the issue of integration would be a catalyst for the new college.

By the time of the 1970 survey, citizens of Houston had obtained a new superintendent, a new board, and a new mandate to integrate public schools immediately. Yet many viewed these rapid changes negatively. According to Ruby Clifton, who served as the secretary to the HISD Board:

The Board which had served during the 1968 defeat of the college proposition was up for re-election. In the meantime, Glenn Fletcher, Superintendent of HISD, resigned due to poor health. Finally, after an arduous screening process was completed, a successor in the person of Dr. George Garver was approved. Unfortunately one of the problems was that he came from a small school district in Michigan which was almost totally white; thus he brought with him little or no experience with a large school district or with integration policies.¹⁰

In 1956, a federal integration order affecting Texas schools caused a lawsuit in HISD. But because of the fear of violence or other racial incidents, the HISD Board moved very slowly in implementing the initial mandate. However, by July 1969, district court Judge John Connally ruled that a plan of action had to be forthcoming by January 1970 or he would personally order compliance to the integration decision as he saw fit. In November 1969, elections were held for the new HISD Board positions. By this time individuals who more nearly typified the various groups in Houston actively sought election. As a result, a more diverse group composed the 1970 Board. It included Dr. George Oser, a Roman Catholic physicist; Eleanor Tinsley, a Southern Baptist woman; Leonard Robbins, a Jewish physician; and the Reverend D. Leon Everett, a black Baptist minister.¹¹ Their candidacies and subsequent election repre-

⁹Memorandum, Kelly Frels to George Garver, November 13, 1970, *ibid.*

¹⁰Ruby Clifton, interview with author, March 26, 1982.

¹¹Marilynn Liddell, "Historical Documentary of Socio-Political and Socio-Economic Factors in Creating Houston Community College (1967-1971)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 1982), 74.

sented a liberal change in attitudes in Houston, as well as a strong commitment to public education for all the people of the city.

The Second Attempt

The new HISD Superintendent, Dr. George Garver, felt an urgent need to overcome some of the bad feelings and bad press stemming from the integration issue through a positive contribution to education such as the creation of a community college in Houston.¹² Dr. Garver drew on his previous experience and modeled his plans on a community college which had been successfully incorporated in Michigan. Dr. Garver was a proponent of the community college concept and enlisted support for the venture from his new, liberal Board. The most vigorous supporters of the idea on the Board were Dr. George Oser and Eleanor Tinsley. Backed by an active volunteer group, the Citizens for Good Schools, these individuals took their cause to the people of Houston. Ms. Tinsley, first chairperson for the Community College Committee, recalled that the entire effort was run much like a grass-roots political campaign.¹³ She recruited Martha and Bill Coats from the CGS group to organize a wide-scale volunteer operation. The Board hired the public relations firm of Goodwin, Dannebaum, Littman and Wingfield, Inc. to provide professional assistance in terms of strategy. Pamphlets, brochures, media spots and public speeches helped to build a positive mood. The committee asked influential groups and individuals to give active, vocal support. Some of those who added weight to the campaign were the Houston Chamber of Commerce, Brown and Root, Inc., the University of Houston, KTRK-TV, Mayor Louie Welch, Fred Hofheinz, Dr. W. I. Dykes (then president of South Texas Junior College) and U.S. Senator Barbara Jordan.¹⁴ Major financial aid for the campaign came through the philanthropy of Robert C. Lanier. Mr. Lanier, himself a graduate of a Texas community college before attending the University of Texas, was a staunch advocate of community colleges.

As momentum grew, Dr. Garver enlisted the aid of J. B. Whiteley, his Superintendent of Vocational Education in HISD. Because of the increasing market for vocational-technical skills in Houston, a heavy emphasis was placed on the occupational aspect of the proposed college — an emphasis which still exists today. Mr. Whiteley was committed to the idea of increasing available training in the occupational trades, and he felt that the HISD Board would back this concept in a community college program. Along with an

¹²George Garver, interview with author, April 3, 1982.

¹³Eleanor Tinsley, interview with author, February 2, 1982.

¹⁴Liddell, 114.

assistant, Mr. Britton Ryan of HISD, the men worked laboriously to update the original needs assessment, to draft a petition to create a college which would meet Coordinating Board guidelines, and to collect the necessary signatures on the petition.

To ensure the success of a second attempt to create the college, key decisions had to be made on matters such as the location of the college's physical structure. Since it was being proposed without an independent tax base, there would be no immediate funds to buy or to build a campus site. The HISD Board agreed to allow the future college to utilize existing facilities belonging to HISD after regular school hours, thus providing locations in which the college could hold night classes.

With most of the provisions at least tentatively in place, the Coordinating Board of Texas scheduled a visit to Houston on April 22, 1971, to hear pros and cons from the educational community as well as from the public at large. For the most part, the atmosphere was supportive. Because of this, Houston leaders and the HISD Board felt confident that the Coordinating Board members who visited Houston would make a positive recommendation to their colleagues in Austin. This was critical since the Coordinating Board acted as the authorizing agent for creation of a community college. On April 23, 1971, Dr. Garver, Ms. Tinsley and Dr. Oser traveled to Austin, expecting pro forma ratification of the proposal. Instead they encountered a serious problem. There had been growing concern within both the Coordinating Board and the Texas legislature about the feasibility of running a community college with neither a tax base nor a local college district. Although there were specific provisions allowing for this alternative, it had never been attempted before. El Paso had already established a college district to accept appropriated funds, but the college district proposal had been defeated in Houston.

When the Houston group arrived, they heard that the Coordinating Board was going to deny the petition for creation of the community college in Houston. Quickly reacting, the three called back to Houston, determined to enlist legal and political help at the last minute to persuade the Board to change its mind. Throughout the day, nearly all of the Board members received urgent phone messages from Houston. When the final vote came on the petition for creating a community college, the measure passed, subject to Houston voters' approval.

The Community Effort

In order to comply with state regulations, an election date had to be set within twenty to thirty days of the Coordinating Board's decision. The date for the Houston vote was set for May 18, 1971. With less than a month to go, it was necessary to rally final support for the vote. On April 26, 1971, the HISD Board met in an emergency session and established the wording of the

proposition to be presented to the voters:

Shall a Houston Independent School District Community Junior College District with (1) no taxing authority; (2) boundaries coextensive with those of the Houston Independent School District; and (3) control and management in the Board of Trustees of the Houston Independent School District, be created as provided in Chapter 51, Subchapter B, of the Texas Education Code?¹⁵

The Board asked parents, students, principals, and teachers to cooperate in the distribution, discussion, and completion of an informative survey seeking to disclose students' plans for making use of a community college. The results, disseminated to the public immediately preceding the May 18 election, pointed to the need for Industrial Arts, Occupational/Technical and Business education.

The Board also sought endorsements from local television and radio stations and from the *Houston Post* and the *Houston Chronicle*. While the *Post* favorably backed the proposal, the *Chronicle* had some reservations. It reported on the opposition, stemming mainly from the Citizens' Task Force led by the Reverend L. E. Eguia, and from the Committee for Sound Education. There were questions of divided loyalties from a Board who served HISD as well as the college, and questions about the consequences of mingling youth aged fifteen to eighteen with an adult student population. As expected, the financial issue re-surfaced. *Chronicle* editorials pointed out that eventually a venture of this magnitude would demand an additional tax rate for Houston taxpayers, violating one of the major conditions and advantages of the 1971 proposal.¹⁶

Proponents of the college argued that the Attorney General had already issued an opinion as to the legality of using the HISD Board simultaneously for their own schools and the college.¹⁷ They hastened to reassure the voters there would be no additional tax burden for the creation of such an institution. On May 18, 1971, the voters went to the polls, and the proposition passed by a final vote of 67,045 to 42,063.¹⁸

The new Houston Community College would be hampered by some of the realities of its creation: no tax base for support, a figurehead leader who would report to the Superintendent of HISD, only part-time faculty with over 5,000 potential students ready to enroll, and a "shoe-string" budget since the Texas legislature met only once every two years and had already voted on

¹⁵HISD Board of Education, *School Board Reporter*, April 26, 1971.

¹⁶*Houston Chronicle*, May 2, 1971.

¹⁷*Houston Post*, April 23, 1971.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, May 19, 1971.

educational appropriations before the school was created. It was a poor, step-child institution at best. Many believed it would fail within the first year of operation.

The Final Result

Between May 18 and August 30, 1971, when the college was scheduled to open its doors to the public, the pace of work became increasingly frantic. Administrative slots had to be filled. Even more significant was the critical need to find a supply of qualified teachers. Clerical staff was needed—yesterday. The bottom line was lack of money. Creative financing became the name of the game as the staff tapped such resources as the National Defense Education Act, the Higher Education Facilities Act and the Allied Health Resources Act. Fortunately, once again due to the influence of Robert Lanier, the college obtained an emergency appropriation from the Texas legislature in order to defray initial cost outlay.

Staffing was an overwhelming problem. Much of this headache fell to the new Dean of Academic Education, Dr. James Harding. Dr. Harding, who is today Vice-President of Instruction for HCCS, recalled the logistics involved in the undertaking. Part of the dilemma stemmed from the fact that until students registered, no one knew just what courses would and should be offered, and how many teachers would be necessary to fill these positions. Since time was a critical factor, the staff drafted the first curriculum on a legal pad, adding and deleting courses as the registration proceeded.

Registration proved to be another nightmare. When the college first opened, it intended to utilize five campus sites allocated by HISD. But these sites were spread out across the city, and manning the registration posts at each of these campuses was no easy task. Finally the new administrative staff was pressed into service. This added more complications. Robert Henckel, the first and current Business Manager, and B. L. Ditto, originally Dean of Occupational Education and Technology (now Vice-President of Administration) had both been recruited from other areas in Texas. For the first few weeks, they lived out of suitcases in hotel rooms, acting as executives, secretaries, faculty and police—sometimes simultaneously. The first Dean of Student Affairs, Dr. Noel McCoy, became the first unofficial security guard, having to provide armed security for monies collected during registration on a daily trip from registration sites, to hotel rooms, and on to the bank.

The HCCS Today

By trial and error, the institution fumbled its way through the first three months of existence. Critics emerged from every corner. By and large the sentiment was to wait for time and trouble to either make or break the school. Despite its initial problems, on August 26, 1985, the Houston Community

College began its fourteenth year of continued successful operation. Now formally the Houston Community College System, the school boasts 33 campus sites, a full-time employment of over 800, and more than 40,000 students.¹⁹

While much has changed about the Houston Community College System, some things remain the same. There is still no tax base and the HISD Board continues to function jointly as the HCCS Board of Trustees. Funding is "earned" through a student contact-hour formula designed by the Texas legislature. The institution has grown and matured over the years, facing the changing world and changing needs around it to fulfill its mandate as a community resource. In line with the true community college concept, the Houston Community College System accommodates the needs of the community and its citizens.

¹⁹J. B. Whiteley, interview with author, October 23, 1984.