
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Welcome Home

We'd been waiting about nine hours, sequestered in a Topeka hotel room knowing that somewhere in the city were two other candidates also waiting for the call. When it finally came, it was Regent Ed McKechnie on the phone. "Michael, would you like to be the next president of Emporia State University?"

I turned to Karen and said, "Welcome home."

For 150 years, Emporia State University has been welcoming home new students, parents, faculty members, and yes, even presidents. Building lasting relationships has been the bedrock of success for public higher education in Kansas and particularly for Emporia State. In 1863, the legislature authorized the charter for a public college to be located in Emporia, Kansas. The act provided, "the exclusive purpose of which shall be the instruction of persons, both male and female, in the art of teaching, and in all of the various branches that pertain to a good common school education... and in the fundamental laws of the United States, and in what regards the rights and duties of citizens."

The Normal, as it was known to locals, opened in 1865 with 18 students. It soon grew to more than 900 students over the next two decades. While none of the early founders could have predicted the many changes in education over the next 150 years, each of them knew that a solid future for The Normal could only come about by building lasting relationships.

When revenue shortfalls hit the Kansas legislature in 1875, all funding for The Normal was pulled. The faculty, however, continued teaching without any promises of payment. In 1876 when fire destroyed the main building, the students lost just one day of classes as the community rallied to provide space and supplies to keep school going. In 1880 both the city of Emporia and Lyon County voted to appropriate over \$20,000 to building projects on campus,

and in 1920, faculty members took out personal loans to purchase new technology for the school, a printing press. Throughout our 150 years, examples of solid relationships such as these are numerous and have been critical to our mission and growth.

When my wife, Karen, and I arrived in Emporia, the university and community were in the midst of planning for the sesquicentennial celebrations. And, indeed, what a special opportunity, how often do you get to celebrate a 150th birthday? I met with many student groups in my early weeks on campus, all of them focused on our rich history and tradition by suggesting we make 150th t-shirts, websites, and banners. I met with faculty, all of whom were filled with great ideas for 150th commemorative books, photo exhibits, and banners. The community was on board with sesquicentennial forums, galas, and some banners right through the middle of town.

I thought a lot in those early months of my home coming at Emporia State and about what a 150th founder might need for the future. What will ensure a solid foundation for the next 150 years? What will 2163 look like in Emporia and the Flint Hills?

I haven't found any banners still in existence from the early days of The Normal, although celebrations of community, learning, and graduation surely took place. What the founders knew then and what we still have today are the relationships – between university and community, between faculty and students, and among one another. Without each other, all banners are meaningless.

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