

## Chapter 52

### “A much healthier stature”

1978-1980

W. Roger Webb became president of Northeastern Oklahoma State University on July 1, 1978, facing problems that had led to the dismissal of his predecessor, an older man with years of experience in university administration. His selection, contrary to the recommendations of the Northeastern advisory committee, had given rise to accusations of cronyism. An editorial in the *Daily Oklahoman* observed, “the regents were not all agreed that a non-academic man should hold the top post at an Oklahoma institution of higher learning.” Only D. Frank Redd, president of Northeastern Normal School in 1909, had assumed office under such uncertain circumstances. Concerning Webb’s chance of success, the *Daily Oklahoman* editorial writer suggested, “We’ll know in a couple of years,” but he concluded, “The man deserves a chance to make it work.”<sup>1</sup>

A native of Heavener, Oklahoma, Webb was thirty-six, when he was named the fourteenth president of Northeastern. Immediately after graduating from Heavener High School in 1960, he worked in the office of the secretary of the U.S. Senate during the first session of the ninety-first Congress. Webb earned a B.A. from Oklahoma State University in 1964 and a J.D. from the University of Oklahoma in 1967. Before completing law school, he was employed by the Department of Public Safety as a legal assistant. Named assistant commissioner of the department in 1971, he was appointed its commissioner in July 1974. His only work experience in higher education was as an adjunct lecturer in physical education at Central State College in 1970.<sup>2</sup>

While most of the Northeastern academic community was willing to give the new president a chance, many were upset about the process that resulted in his selection. Ability to mobilize political support had been an essential qualification of the chief executive

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<sup>1</sup> “Webb Deserves a Chance,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5 April 1978.

<sup>2</sup> “Webb Seeks College Post,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 26 November 1977. “Presidents of the University of Central Oklahoma: Roger Webb,” Chambers Library, University of Central Oklahoma. <http://library.ucok.edu/archives/page-files/university-president2.asp?id=21> (accessed 7 April 2008.)

officer of Northeastern since the appointment of Albert Sidney Wyly as the normal school's first president. With fifteen years of statehouse experience in Oklahoma City and a gift for public relations, Webb quickly defied his critics' objections and made those who had supported his candidacy appear prophetic. The new president had obviously studied the problems that had doomed Robert Collier and developed an effective counter strategy. In analyzing Webb's success in overcoming problems that had seemed to defy solution, it is tempting to draw comparison to Ronald Reagan's transformation of public perception following the Jimmy Carter administration. Webb anticipated Reagan's approach by two and a half years and probably worked harder at effecting a reversal of Northeastern's fortunes than America's fortieth president did in renewing the nation's self confidence.

In the three months following his selection, Webb spent as much time on campus as his duties as commissioner of public safety permitted. On many of his visits he stayed in the dorms, where he was able to observe first-hand conditions that figured prominently in student unrest and the university's most threatening financial problem. In a wide-ranging interview with student reporters for the campus newspaper, Webb adroitly avoided committing himself to any firm policies, but stressed his experience in shaping public relations, working with the legislature, and running an agency with 11,000 employees and a monthly budget of two million dollars. By the time he officially assumed office, the new president was familiar with the university's personnel, procedures, and problems that confronted him. Where Collier had raised expectations he had difficulty fulfilling, the new president stressed the need for stability. Webb promised to listen to the views of students and faculty and assured reporters that he was not going to be a president who made all decisions unilaterally without seeking the opinions of others. He added, "My decisions will not necessarily be made on what is the popular thing to do or what most people I have visited with have to say." Webb made a special effort to convince students he was alert to their concerns. In the past, students had complained that they were excluded from the annual pre-Christmas Boare's Heade Feaste, which attracted large crowds of outsiders. Webb added a special students' night to the festive dinner, which those living in the dorms could attend by using their meal points.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "New President Webb Speaks Out on Problems," *Northeastern*, 19 April 1978, 3 "Feaste to

On the issue of housing policy, which had provoked student protest since the re-imposition of restrictions on visitation after the dismissal of Collier, Webb adopted a hard line and imposed rules that prohibited visitation from Monday through Thursday and reduced the weekend hours. Students were told that the new policy was designed to protect privacy rights and to produce an atmosphere more conducive to study during the school week. The meal-point system was revised to limit student options, but university officials promised that the menu had been expanded and was under the supervision of a professional chef with experience at the Tulsa Country Club and the Mayo Hotel. They also stressed, "We're not cutting food and the students are not going to suffer to make bond payments." Confronted immediately with protest from dorm residents, Webb listened to their complaints and promised to reconsider the policies, but not in the near future. Opposition to the change was more restrained than the previous year. At a meeting with seventy dorm residents, housing officials pointed out that many students had privately admitted that they liked the new policy and that parents had not liked what they had heard about the unrestricted visitation policy. The director of food service received applause when he outlined recent cafeteria improvements. If the visitation issue had not been resolved, it had been defused. In early 1970, the sandwich shop in the university center was closed because it attracted few customers. It was replaced by a snack bar on the first floor of Wilson Hall, where it would be more convenient for students, particularly commuters.<sup>4</sup>

Like most new administrators, Webb made sweeping changes in the school's administrative structure. Several weeks before he assumed office, student housing, the university center, and stadium were consolidated under the office of auxiliary services, and Robert Smith was named interim director. The reorganization placed Smith in charge of housing, a position that had been vacant for almost a year since the resignation of Charles Waldie, and unified control of housing and food services, which had been operating at cross-purposes. Shortly after assuming office, Webb named Dr. Leonard Sharp as director of auxiliary enterprises. The thirty-six-year-old

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Include Meal Point Night," *Northeastern*, 18 October 1978, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Melinda Walters "Policy, Repairs New For Dorms," Webb Looks For Stability," Marshall Eiss, "Meal Point System Revised," *Northeastern*, 6 September 1978, 1. Lori Clayton, "Residents Discuss Hours," *Northeastern*, 13 September 1978, 1. "Snack Bar Replaces Closed Sandwich Shop," *Northeastern*, 24 September 1979, 3.

Ph.D. in college student personnel administration had been director of housing at Southern Illinois University and had fifteen years of experience in student services. He may have found the problems he faced more than he had anticipated, for he resigned after a few months on the job, and Smith was named permanent director. Webb also hired Joyce Darlene Jennings to replace J.K. Hulcher, who had resigned earlier in the summer as director of student financial aids. The financial aids office was moved from the administration building to the one-story brick building just north of Seminary Hall to provide better space and accessibility.<sup>5</sup>

Webb scrapped much of the school's structure created by Collier after Northeastern was designated a university. With the exception of academic affairs, all the vice presidencies were abolished. Elwin Fite remained vice president of the university and academic affairs. Lindsey Owsley continued to direct the school's business affairs, but as a director, not a vice president. No directors were named for student affairs or planning and development. Dr. Don Betz, associate professor of political science, was named to direct the Northeastern Educational Foundation and the President's Leadership Class program on a half-time basis. Ken Collins, who had been assistant to the president for media and public relations, was named director of a new office of university relations, which cleared the way for Webb to hire an experienced Oklahoma newsman to direct the university's public relations. Ed Brocksmith resigned as news director of Tulsa radio station KRMG to head Northeastern's office of public information. In radio news since he had graduated from OSU in 1965, Brocksmith had contacts in the print and broadcast media throughout the state and particularly in northeastern Oklahoma. He spearheaded the campaign to change the public image of Northeastern, which had been tarnished by a decade of negative news and controversy.<sup>6</sup>

Webb's first priority was to change the perception of the Tahlequah university. He launched his campaign by literally changing its name. Since it had been designated a university, the school had been referred to as NEOSU, an acronym Webb

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<sup>5</sup> Lea Lessley, "President Appoints Directors," *Northeastern*, 12 July 1978, 1. Minutes, Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges, 20 July 1978, 30, 21 September 1978, 30. "Campus Offices Shift Location," *Northeastern*, 6 September 1978, 3.

<sup>6</sup> "Regents Approve Recommendations," *Northeastern*, 276 July 1978, 1. Tim Frayser, "Tulsa Radio News Director Joins Northeastern Staff," *Northeastern*, 6 September 1978, 3. Minutes, Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges, 20 July 1978, 30-31.

considered unmarketable. By mid-fall, for all purposes except legal documents, the university was called Northeastern State University or NSU, and in December the unpopular stylized arrowhead created as the school's logo by a Tulsa advertising agency in the Collier administration was replaced by a running NSU in which the letters were connected.<sup>7</sup>

Renaming the school was only one of many elements of the effort to revitalize it. With less than two months until the beginning of the fall semester, significant repair and remodeling of the dormitories was impossible, but Webb publicly announced "repair and maintenance of the dorms as a top priority." Maintenance men were able to paint most of the dorm rooms, and students were encouraged to pick colors they liked for their room. Webb said that he had visited all the dorms personally and promised continued improvement, which he characterized as an investment in the future.<sup>8</sup>

Recruitment was also a major factor in Webb's plans. Early in the fall semester he set a goal of a twelve percent increase in new student enrollment and a total of 7,300 students by 1983, despite national predictions of decreased enrollment throughout the 1980s. Competing recruiting teams divided the school's fifteen-county area and conducted a multifaceted campaign to promote the university and convince high school seniors and junior college students that Northeastern was the ideal location to continue their education. Although Webb was personally involved in many aspects of the campaign, the recruitment effort was directed by Dr. Ken Collins, who had recently been named director of university relations. The new president was also concerned about the physical appearance of the campus and personally led a small group of students, faculty, and staff in picking up trash and cleaning Beta Pond at the southern edge of the campus. Webb also moved swiftly to improve the campus' most recognizable landmark, the Seminary Hall tower. For years the structure had clocks that showed the correct time only twice a day and a bell tower with no bells. In addition to replacing the clocks, Webb launched a campaign to raise funds to purchase a carillon that would peal the hour and chime melodies to lend a

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<sup>7</sup> Lori Clayton, "Cease Fire," *Northeastern*, 8 November 1978, 2. "New Logo, *Northeastern*, 13 December 1978, 1.

<sup>8</sup> "Loeser Dorms Get Repairs," *Northeastern*, 26 July 1978, 3. "Students To Select Dorm Room Colors," *Northeastern*, 20 September 1978 1. Melinda Walters, "Policy, Repairs New For Dorms," *Northeastern*, 6 September 1978, 1.

collegiate air to the campus. Although foundry bells proved to be too heavy for the tower, the campaign quickly raised more than \$15,000 to purchase and install a twenty-five-bell, electronic carillon in time to ring in the holiday season. To ensure that everyone realized that a new day had dawned at Northeastern, at a late morning pep rally in front of Seminary Hall, 3,000 members of the university community symbolically buried apathy and gave birth to spirit in a ceremony covered by news crews from Tulsa television stations. After leading a series of cheers, President Webb joined the crowd in a snake dance through the campus, an occurrence not witnessed at Northeastern since the 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

The burial of apathy and many of the other initiatives in the early days of the Webb administration were symbolic or designed to return long-term dividends. A contract negotiated with the Cherokee Nation and the Department of Labor to provide housing for an Indian-emphasis job corps program offered immediate benefits. Located in the Leoser Complex, the federal program to teach marketable skills to at-risk young Americans provided a regular revenue stream from dormitories that had been unfilled. The program, which began in 1978 with thirty-five trainees from the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek tribes, was scheduled to grow to 250 within a year. Income Northeastern received from it provided immediate relief from the bond crisis that had plagued the school since the late 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

Filling the dorms with college students, not job corps trainees, remained Webb's objective. Despite his optimistic goal of a twelve percent increase in enrollment, the new president realized that it would be easier to retain students already enrolled than to recruit more. Attrition had always been high among freshmen, but students at all levels dropped out of college or transferred to other schools. The Northeastern registrar reported that thirty-five percent of students eligible to return to NSU in the fall did not enroll. Webb appointed a committee to study the reasons for the high rate of attrition and offer recommendations for reducing the number. In a preliminary report members of the committee unanimously agreed

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<sup>9</sup> Lea Lessley, "Collins Named Director of University Relations," *Northeastern*, 26 July 1978, 3. Steve Kinder, "Recruitment Goals Outlined," *Northeastern*, 27 September, 1978, 3. "Campus Area Cleaned-up," *Northeastern* 27 September 1978, 1. Tessie Gray, "Mock Burial Rally Generates High Spirits," *Northeastern* 4 October 1978, 1. "Carillon Installed on Trial Basis, Plays 25 Tunes," *Northeastern*, 22 November 1978, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ron Lucas, "Job Corps Program Set to Start," *Northeastern*, 4 October 1978, 1.

that immediately establishing a pre-enrollment system offered the most promising way of retaining students. Although the school had had an earlier system that had been used by only half the students and the academic vice president had suggested further study, committee members reported that a Kansas school about the same size as NSU had a ninety-five percent return rate with students who pre-enrolled. An **early alert system** for students not attending class regularly could also improve retention, according to members of the committee.<sup>11</sup>

Although ninety-seven percent of students polled in summer school favored pre-enrollment, and President Webb had ordered a feasibility study, the procedure was not high priority until it was recommended by the retention committee. With speed atypical of collegiate administrations, within weeks the Office of Admissions and Records announced plans for pre-enrollment. Registrar James Watkins admitted, "The only reason we got it was because the president said do it." After the first students had used the new system for the spring enrollment of 1979, a Northeastern coed commented, "It's amazing that after all these years of being told it can't be done, just how quickly and efficiently it was done this semester. . . . President Roger Webb should be praised for his tremendous effort and push to provide a pre-enrollment system for the spring semester."<sup>12</sup> Equally amazing was praise from students for the Northeastern president. Despite his insistence on enforcing widely unpopular housing rules, Webb's omnipresence on campus and his optimistic outlook had impressed students, faculty, and individuals interested in Northeastern throughout the region and the state.

The retention committee also studied the reason students did not remain until graduation. Some of the issues could not be addressed by the university, but the committee concluded that many students needed assistance in budgeting the funds they received from financial aid and explored ways of intervening to help overcome problems that might compel them to leave school. One of the economic concerns confronting NSU's students, particularly

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<sup>11</sup> "Student Retention Committee Established," *Northeastern*, 4 October 1978, 3. "Retention Committee Recommends Pre-enrollment," *Northeastern*, 18 October 1978, 1. "New Methods Needed," *Northeastern*, 8 November 1978, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Lori Clayton, "Student Survey Reveals Most Prefer Pre-Enrollment," *Northeastern*, 6 September 1978, 2. "Pre-enrollment Wanted," *Northeastern*, 20 September 1978, 1. Lori Clayton, "Cease Fire," *Northeastern*, 6 December 1978, 2.

commuters, was the soaring price of gasoline, which approached a dollar in mid-1979 following the seizure of American hostages in Iran. The school's registrar considered the cost of fuel a factor in the decline in enrollment in the spring of 1979. More motorcycles and bicycles appeared on campus, and students considered purchasing smaller cars. This second energy crisis of the 1970s might have encouraged more students to live in the dorms, but by the next year the price of fuel began a six-year decline, and students and the public in general forgot about energy efficiency.<sup>13</sup>

Although enrollment did not improve immediately, by the spring of 1979 dormitory occupancy began to rebound. An increase of 1.6% might not seem impressive, but during the past few years the annual decline in occupancy had average about 12%, and the downward spiral had lasted ten years. Webb had confounded predictions that the university would default on its payment in June. In fact, the school met the \$641,000 obligation without dipping into the reserve fund. Funds were raised from dorm rental, charges to academic units renting space in the dorms, and income from space leased to the job corps.<sup>14</sup>

Planning for an optometry program approved by the higher regents in 1976 may have been delayed by the dismissal of President Collier or by the chancellor's determination to scuttle it. In September 1977, Acting President Elwin Fite requested additional time to study the specific needs of the program and "present a proposal to this Board if it appears to be feasible." Fite appointed Dr. Kirk Boatright, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, to proceed with the development of the program. Planning did not move into high gear until Webb assumed the presidency of Northeastern in July 1978. Within weeks, Dr. Chester Pheiffer, dean of the College of Optometry at the University of Houston, had been hired to serve as a consultant to develop a professional program in optometry at Northeastern. By September, the university's board of regents had granted a request by President Webb to seek the approval of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) to establish an optometry program on the Tahlequah campus. The plan envisioned an initial class of forty, which would

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<sup>13</sup>Melinda Walters, "Committee Survey Shows Jobs Lure Students Away," *Northeastern*, 31 January 1979, 1. "Commuters Battle Crisis Of Rising Petro Rates," *Northeastern*, 18 July 1979, 3. John Storjohann, "Gas Prices Contribute to NSU Enrollment Drop," *Northeastern*, 21 February 1979, 1.

<sup>14</sup>"Dorm Bond Default Avoided," *Northeastern*, 21 February 1979, 1.



expand to 160 within four years if approval were granted for the final two years of the program. Pending that approval, students completing the second year would have to transfer to other schools of optometry to finish their last two years of work. Cost of the program was estimated to be approximately a million dollars annually. Northeastern's proposal presented plans for the two-year program approved by the higher regents and provided details for the establishment of the final two years for the regents' consideration. Boatright considered a full, four-year program absolutely essential since he realized prospects for transferring students at the end of their second year were problematic.<sup>15</sup>

In May 1979, OSRHE approved Northeastern's request for a two-year program on a scaled-down basis. Instead of an initial class of 40, the regents authorized twenty-four students for the first year and an equal number the second. As approved, the program required that students completing the second year transfer to one of the nation's thirteen degree-granting optometry programs. Cost of a four-year program was a factor in the regents' decision not to authorize the full course of study, but U.S. Senator Henry Bellmon informed the regents that the Bureau of Indian Affairs was considering construction of a hospital in Tahlequah, which could include space and equipment for the training of third and fourth-year optometry students. Boatright, who had been aware of the prospects of federal assistance in reducing the financial burden of the final two years, said, "The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education cannot be expected to even consider the four-year program until construction on the proposed Hastings Indian Health Service Training Hospital is guaranteed." Despite continuing efforts to derail the program, President Webb sought the approval of the higher regents for a four-year program by the time the first class began course work.<sup>16</sup>

At the beginning of the fall 1979 semester, twenty-four students, all with Oklahoma addresses, enrolled in the new program. The

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<sup>15</sup> "Consultant Employed," *Northeastern*, 26 July 1978, 1. "Pre-Enrollment Needs Presented by Registrar," *Northeastern*, 4 October 1978, 3. "College Awaits Regents Consent," *Northeastern*, 25 October 1978, 4. Minutes of the Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges, 15 September 1977, 20, and 21 September 1978, 31, 34-83. Kirk Boatright, Public Lecture, 14 April 2008, College of Optometry Auditorium, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

<sup>16</sup> "University Beginning State's First Optometry School," *Daily Oklahoman*, 20 May 1979. Ed Montgomery, "Higher Education Regents Approve Optometry Program for Northeastern," *Daily Oklahoman*, 24 May 1979. "Optometry Program Slated for Fall Semester Initiation," *Northeastern*, 9 May 1979, 1. "Regents Approve President's Recommendations," *Northeastern*, 26 September 1979, 1.

identification of all students as in-state may have been the result of a concern by the regents that the program would become regional, rather than exclusively Oklahoman. While most sections of Oklahoma were represented in the first class, a disproportionate number came from the northeastern part of the state. Boatright, who believed the program had been designed to fail, was convinced that its survival depended on the person chosen to direct it. While planning the program, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences had become familiar with many of the key administrators in optometric education throughout the nation and felt that Chester Pheiffer, whose help designing Northeastern's program had been vital, was the logical choice. When the salary authorized for the position was far below a realistic minimum, Boatright, working with Ross Swimmer, chief of the Cherokee Nation, secured consulting work that persuaded Pheiffer to accept the position. The first optometry faculty, headed by Pheiffer, chair of the optometry division, included Dr. E. Norbert Smith, a Texas Tech University Ph.D. with a joint appointment in the biology department and the optometry division, Dr. Leslie L. Walls, a graduate of the Berkeley School of Optometry, and Dr. Henricus Van Veen, a graduate of the University of Houston College of Optometry. During its early years the optometry program operated as a division of the College of Arts and Sciences. It was housed in part of Wyly Hall, which enabled the administration to transfer funds from the education and general operating budget to help with the debt repayment on the school's bonds.<sup>17</sup>

Webb's campaign to recast Northeastern's image had been remarkably successful for almost seven months, but on the evening of January 29, a thirty-five-year-old Muskogee woman attending evening classes was abducted from the library parking lot, raped, and thrown off Goat's Bluff north of Tahlequah. When she survived the fall, her assailant shot her. Despite the fall, gunshot wound, and severe cold, the woman survived. The president and dean of women rushed to the hospital and later announced plans for escorting female students to their cars and other measures to safeguard coeds. Six months later a Tahlequah resident, not affiliated with the university, was arrested and convicted of the attack. The episode was an

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<sup>17</sup> Kirk Boatright, Public Lecture, 14 April 2008, College of Optometry Auditorium, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

isolated incident, but it received extensive press coverage around the state, creating notoriety Webb was trying to avoid.<sup>18</sup>

Although the federal courts were not satisfied with the university's progress in fully integrating the university, the militant stage of the movement to achieve the rights guaranteed by the constitution were now part of the school's history. Black Heritage activities that had once been front-page news were relegated to page five of the student newspaper in 1979 and reduced from a full week to four days.<sup>19</sup> A quarter century after the *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*, decision, NSU's fraternities and sororities remained largely, if not totally segregated. Two black fraternities were active on campus, but no black sororities existed. Both groups had auxiliaries with coeds working in concert with fraternity members. On Saturday, October 10, 1979, the members of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity celebrated the tenth anniversary of the founding of chapter on the Northeastern campus. Dr. Lena Rotton, dean of student affairs, praised the group and observed, "They have distinguished themselves over the years and they have become more responsive to the needs of the community."<sup>20</sup>

Keeping the curriculum relevant to contemporary needs was high on the agenda of most of Northeastern's presidents. With Webb's background in law enforcement, it was not surprising that one of the first additions to the curriculum in his administration was a master's program in criminal justice. NSU was the first university in the state with a graduate degree in this area, which allowed majors to concentrate on investigation or management. With the support of a grant through the Cherokee Nation, Northeastern introduced a master's program in tribal management, essentially an M.B.A. focused on the operation of Indian government. After World War II, federal officials encouraged self-government among Native Americans. The tribes recognized by federal officials soon became big business that needed well-trained managers. The first advanced degree of its kind in the nation, the master's in tribal management was aimed primarily at Native Americans, but it was open to anyone who met the entry qualifications.<sup>21</sup> A new B.A. degree in social

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<sup>18</sup> Tim Frayser, "Student Raped; Police Searching of Suspect," 7 February 1979, 1. "Rape, Shooting Hearing Slated," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7 August 1979. "Tahlequah Man Guilty In Rape Trial," *Daily Oklahoman*, 2 November 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Carol Brown, "Students Salute Black Heritage," *Northeastern*, 7 March 1979, 5.

<sup>20</sup> "Alphas Hold First Reunion," *Northeastern*, 31 October 1979, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Melinda Walters, "Regents Approve for Fall Schedule Criminal Justice Masters Program," *Northeastern*, 28 March 1979, 1.

work was offered for the first time in the fall semester of 1980. The only state school in eastern Oklahoma with this type of program, Northeastern designed the curriculum to address the growing need for trained professionals. Within a few years, program graduates were found in department of human service offices throughout Oklahoma and the region<sup>22</sup>

Inflation, which had peaked in the mid-1970s spiked again as the decade neared its end, compelling the university to raise cafeteria prices five percent. In 1980 in-state tuition increased about 10% to \$11.50 a credit hour for 1000-2000-level classes, \$12.50 for 3000-4000, and \$20.50 for graduate work. Confounding classical economic theory, unemployment increased as prices rose. While stagflation worked a hardship on many Americans, it had its beneficial side for the university. With federal financial aid available for college students, starting or returning to college was preferable to unemployment; enrollment surged in the fall of 1979 and continued to grow most years for more than a decade.<sup>23</sup>

The end of the spring semester of 1980 marked the close of the career of Vice President Elwin Fite, who began teaching at Northeastern in 1953 as an associate professor of music. Appointed dean of the college in 1963, Fite led the institution as acting president during the 1977-78 academic year, after the dismissal of Collier and before Webb became president. Dr. J.T. Sego, associate academic dean, became interim vice president of academic affairs until a permanent replacement for Fite had been hired. Sego had also served in that position during the year Fite was acting president. Other members of the faculty with long service who retired in 1980 were Dr. Emmit Wheat, professor of mathematics, 20 years, Mary E. Tressider, assistant professor of library science, 19 years, Capitola Wadley, assistant professor of library science, 16 years, and Dr. Adele Turner, professor of sociology, 15 years.<sup>24</sup>

The retirement of Fite was followed by a gradual restructuring of the university. Webb created a new office of continuing education and public service to develop cooperative programs with businesses,

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<sup>22</sup> Kathie Stephens, "Management Degree First in Nation," *Northeastern*, 9 May 1979, 3. Dan Pierce, "Social Work Degree Proposed," *Northeastern*, 20 February 1980, 1. Bettie McCrary, "Regents Approve Two New Programs," 24 September 1980, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Kinder, "Inflation Forces Increase In Cafeteria Food Prices," *Northeastern*, 11 April 1979, 1. Daniel Clemons, "Tuition Increase Expected at NSU," *Northeastern*, 16 April 1980, 1.

<sup>24</sup> "Five Professors Make Summer Retirement," *Northeastern*, 11 April 1979, 3. "Fite Retires from Office," *Northeastern*, 13 June 1979, 1. David Duncan, "Sego Receives University Interim Appointment as Vice President," *Northeastern*, 27 June 1979, 1.

industries, and government agencies. The position was also responsible for placement, personnel, and maintenance of the university's physical plant. Dr. Neil Morton, who had headed continuing education and special projects for the past six years, was named dean of the combined office. An office of university services was created to oversee financial aids, housing, the university center, and data processing. James K. Howard, hired the previous year as the assistant dean of student affairs, was appointed to direct the new office, which supervised a quarter of the university's employees and administered twenty-eight percent of its budget. Howard considered the purpose of his new position as "solving problems, helping those who need it, and being as friendly as possible."<sup>25</sup>

Webb was always alert to projects that could enhance the school's reputation and provide positive interaction with the public. Spurred by the fitness craze of the late 1970s, the college sought the assistance of local businessmen in constructing a fitness trail on campus property. Each of the 20-stations on the 1.1-mile trail cost about \$100 and was financed by a different business. At each station instructions were given for a specific exercise to be performed on equipment located there. The trail, which was open to the public, was named for Guy Lookabaugh and D.M. "Doc" Wadley, two of the men who coached Northeastern football between 1929 and 1949. Webb also encouraged faculty and staff members to stage a canoe race on the nearby Illinois River in cooperation with the Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission after the Labor Day holiday. The three-stage, fourteen-mile relay race was open to anyone over the age of sixteen, with particular effort made to promote the race in the area high schools.<sup>26</sup>

Northeastern's recruitment efforts were rewarded with an increase in enrollment in the fall of 1979, the first in five years. Although three of NSU's sister institutions lost enrollment in the 1979-80 school year, the Tahlequah university reported an eight percent gain. More significantly, the 800 freshmen who registered represented an increase of 33%, convincing evidence that the recruitment effort in area high schools had been effective. The most

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<sup>25</sup> "Morton Heads New Office," *Northeastern*, 11 July 1979, 1. "University Services Designed for Students," 312 September 1979, 5.

<sup>26</sup> "New Fitness Trail Opens To Public Near Campus," *Northeastern*, 27 June 1979, 3. "Canoe Race Scheduled," *Northeastern*, 12 September 1979, 3. Dale Lunsford, "First River Race Proves Successful," *Northeastern*, 3 October 1979, 4. Cheryl Leeds, "Community Fitness Trail Promotes Local Health," *Northeastern*, 20 February 1980, 4. "Fitness Trail To Be Dedicated," *Tahlequah Pictorial Press*, 17 April 1980, 1.

important statistic, however, was the number of students in the university's dorms; occupancy was at 96%. The 948 students living in seven residential halls on campus represented an increase of 250 over the previous year. After seeing the statistics, Webb realized that the bond payments could be made without transferring funds from other accounts, which he felt placed "the university in a much healthier stature." The president, who viewed higher education like a business, was also determined to reduce the drop-out rate by treating students like "preferred customers."<sup>27</sup>

Recognizing the importance of computers in the business and academic world, Webb approved the purchase of a new Hewlett Packard mainframe computer over a five-year period to replace the IBM system acquired under President Collier. The most obvious difference between the two systems was the disappearance of the ubiquitous IBM punch cards students had been told not to bend, spindle, fold, or mutilate. The new HP system operated with thirty-two online terminals and had two central processing units, which provided a backup in case one failed. Anticipating the arrival of the more powerful and more sophisticated equipment, university officials had sought permission for the regents to offer a computer science major. In explaining the value of the new system, Webb said, "This will provide a tremendous opportunity for the students to learn what was impossible before." Jim Howard, who supervised data processing in his new position, predicted, "There will be a computer terminal in classrooms and they will be accessible to both students and faculty."<sup>28</sup>

The John Vaughan Library had moved into the computer age in 1975 when it was electronically connected to the libraries of other colleges and universities participating in the Ohio College Library Center (OCLC) network. In 1980 the library allocated almost \$2,000 to fund electronic searches of about 30 databases. Not only were the computer searches faster and more thorough than manual ones, they also allowed the library to cancel subscriptions to expensive, but little-used paper indices. By twenty-first century standards the 1980 search techniques were slow and cumbersome, but they anticipated a trend that revolutionized research and the very nature of libraries.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Freshman Enrollment Up, On-Campus Housing Fills," *Northeastern*, 12 September 1979, 1. NSU Enrollment Increases," *Northeastern*, 26 September 1979, 1.

<sup>28</sup> "University Services Designed for Students," 5. "New Computer System Expands Academic, Administrative Services." *Northeastern*, 26 September 1979, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Bettie McCrary, "Automated Literature Search Service Offered To NSU Students In Library,"

Despite the efforts of the Webb administration to improve relations with the students, a brief blackout Monday evening, October 1, demonstrated the volatility of some of the male students. When a transformer outage plunged the campus into darkness before 10 p.m., 500 men poured out of the dormitories and resorted to what was by now almost habitual behavior for NSU males with nothing better to occupy their time—they marched on a women's dorm. This time they congregated around Ross Hall chanting for the coeds to come out. Ordered back to their dorms by campus security, the men chanted, "Hell no, we won't go." Reinforced by the Tahlequah police and highway patrol, the campus security force was eventually able to disburse the crowd and remained at the women's dorm until after power was restored at about 11 p.m. Although stopped short of his goal, one of the men claimed, "This is the most fun we've had all year."<sup>30</sup>

Other incidents on campus triggered potentially dangerous confrontations that were defused largely because of the timely intervention of campus security. After the homecoming football game, the younger brother of a coed with connections to Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity was assaulted and robbed in the university center parking lot. The assailants were described as Mexican or Indian. Members of the fraternity decided they must be associated with the Talking Leaves Job Corps and went to the center in the Leoser Complex seeking to settle the score. Alerted by job corps officials, campus security arrived in time to prevent violence. At halftime during the Parents' Day football game, a group of fraternity members climbed a fence on the north end of the field and began removing banners of another group. Their action provoked a response by members of the other group, leading to a fight in the end zone. Only the arrival of campus security prevented the confrontation from becoming a brawl. A court convened by the Interfraternity Council determined that the action of the president of the Phi Lams had provoked the fight and placed his fraternity on six months' probation.<sup>31</sup>

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*Northeastern*, 27 February 1980, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Metzke, "Hour-long Dorm Blackout Occurs As Result of Transformer Explosion," *Northeastern*, 10 October 1979, 3.

<sup>31</sup> "Visitor Assaulted, Robbed During NSU Homecoming," *Northeastern*, 31 October 1979, 1. "Campus Security Stops Halftime Fight, Inter-Fraternity Court Hearing Held," *Northeastern*, 7 November 1979, 1. "Fraternity Placed On Probation During IFC Court Last Week," *Northeastern*, 14 November 1979, 1. Recollections of Dr. V. Lyle Haskins, Typed critique of chapter manuscript, December 2008, in the possession of the author.

While the renting of dormitory space to the Talking Leaves Job Corps had relieved the pressure of bond payments, the presence on campus of at-risk youth created friction between Northeastern students and the job corps participants. An editorial in the *Northeastern* noted several conflicts between NSU and job corps students within the past several months. Recognizing the importance of the federal program to the university, President Webb worked with the Cherokee Nation and the Talking Leaves administrative personnel to reduce friction and maintain order. Although the personnel at the center took measures to impress the importance of good conduct on those enrolled in the training program, they were no more able than NSU officials to ensure that their undergraduates followed the rules outlined in the student handbook. Late in 1980, the principal chief of the Cherokees, responding to public concern, announced that job corps personnel would request that future trainees be screened to eliminate troublemakers. He also said he had charged the job corps director with getting his house in order. Despite the increased effort to control those in the program, as long the job corps center remained on campus tension flared periodically.<sup>32</sup>

With the possibility of default on the bonds in check, dorm occupancy up, and declining enrollment reversed, Webb decided it was time to showcase the accomplishments of the students and faculty and demonstrate the school's potential. In October, the student newspaper announced that April 18-26 had been designated Renaissance '80 Week at NSU. All areas of the college contributed to "an immense array of activities, exhibits, and programs . . . offered to attract and inform students, parents, alumni, business men and civil leaders about the current status of NSU." Dr. Don Betz, who proposed and coordinated the event, explained, "This will be a week in which Northeastern will present itself to the state and its people as a multi-purpose educational institution committed to diversity and excellence."<sup>33</sup>

After an extended search, in mid-December 1979, Webb named Dr. Ronald Seltzer as Northeastern's vice president for academic affairs. The new vice president had earned his B.S. at the University of Wisconsin, his M.S. at Indiana University, and his Ph.D. at the

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<sup>32</sup> "Job Corps Center Develops Conflicts," *Northeastern*, 7 November 1979, 2. "Discipline problems prompt new policies at Job Corps," *Tahlequah Pictorial Press*, 24 December 1980, 1.

<sup>33</sup> "Renaissance '80 Scheduled for April," *Northeastern*, 17 October 1979, 3.



University of Nebraska in business education and economics. After service in the United States Army, Seltzer taught in five different institutions of higher learning. When he accepted the position at Northeastern, he was assistant dean of the College of Business Administration at Georgia State College in Atlanta. Despite impressive credentials and Webb's conviction that "Ron Seltzer is the right person to lead Northeastern's academic program into the 1980's," the new vice president quickly alienated most of the deans and many of the department chairs who worked under him. He did have one salutary impact on the school—he managed to unite two deans who had worked at cross purposes for years. They apparently concluded that their differences were minor compared to the threat posed by the new vice president. Seltzer, who assumed his new duties at NSU in April of 1980, submitted his resignation to the board of regents in March of 1982. He remained vice president until the end of the fiscal year and was assigned other administrative and teaching duties for the fall semester. In September he resigned as assistant to the president for program development to accept a position elsewhere.<sup>34</sup>

New construction, which had essentially ended with the retirement of Harrell Garrison, resumed on a modest scale after Webb became president. The first new structure on campus after the completion to the addition to the practical arts building was a gazebo located between Seminary Hall and the John Vaughan Library. During the "burial of apathy" in 1978, Webb realized that the university needed a center for outdoor functions on campus. The gazebo, which housed a sound system and lighting, was completed in mid-April 1980, just in time for use during Renaissance '80.<sup>35</sup> The new structure was located in the same area as the proposed amphitheater, which had been planned but never built during the construction of the central mall from the education building to the fine arts complex in the 1970s. Much of the construction during Webb's administration was the maintenance and remodeling of existing buildings. While refurbishing dormitories was the administration's initial priority, maintenance had also been deferred on many of the school's academic facilities. The thirty-year-old industrial arts building had been constructed with little thought of

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<sup>34</sup> Cheryl Leeds, "Regents Approve VP Appointment," *Northeastern*, 19 December 1979, 1. Minutes, Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges, 18 March 1982, 17, 16 September 1982, 29.

<sup>35</sup> "New Gazebo Construction Started, Completion Expected by Mid April," *Northeastern*, 5 March 1980, 1. "New Gazebo Completed For Renaissance Week," *Northeastern*, 16 April 1980, 6.

energy conservation. With the cost of fuel increasing, in the spring of 1980 some of the building's windows were removed and insulation installed to make the structure more energy efficient. Lighting throughout the building was improved and made more cost effective. Other work, including wiring, replacement of flammable ceiling tiles, weather-proofing, and making restrooms wheelchair accessible, brought the total cost of the project to \$104,000. The fine arts auditorium, in constant use for almost thirty years received new carpeting, seats, paneling, lights and sound system during the summer. A drainage ditch south of campus along Valley Avenue was leased to the university by the city for \$1 for 99 years. A large-diameter pipe was installed under a new parking lot bordered by flowerbeds, transforming what had been an eye-sore into a southern approach to the school that was attractive and functional.<sup>36</sup>

No matter how many acres were paved over for parking lots, there never seemed to be enough space for the cars that converged on campus each school day. Captain Gene Frusher confirmed what students and faculty already knew. He reported that members of the Northeastern community had registered 3,400 vehicles, but the school had only 2,700 parking spaces. Like Dean Bally in the 1950s, Frusher urged student cooperation as the best method of overcoming the shortage of spaces, and like those who had heard Bally's advice, students, looking vainly for a place to park as their classes were beginning, found little comfort in the suggestion.<sup>37</sup>

In the summer the administration building was re-carpeted, made more energy efficient and more accessible to the disabled, and renovated to provide better accommodations for data processing equipment and personnel. A building near Bagley Hall used as an animal care facility was renovated to meet federal standards. Maintenance men worked through the summer to repaint and repair rooms in Logan and Hastings residential halls.<sup>38</sup>

For decades students and faculty had periodically advocated a week devoted exclusively to final exams, and like many of the issues of this era despite repeated rebuffs, proponents would not let the cause die. Opponents of the plan suggested that a week devoted to final exams would lengthen the semester, but an official in the

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<sup>36</sup> Tudy Moore, "Building Renovations Scheduled for Spring," *Northeastern*, 30 January 1980, 1. Daniel Clemons, "Regents OK Projects," *Northeastern*, 27 February 1980, 1. "Campus Change," *Northeastern*, 30 January 1980, 2.

<sup>37</sup> "Parking Survey Taken, New Lots to be Added," *Northeastern*, 26 March 1980, 3.

<sup>38</sup> "Renovations On Campus Under Way," *Northeastern*, 18 July 1980, 4.

regents office pointed out that it could be considered part of the required sixteen weeks. Central State, which had recently adopted a finals week, started the same day classes began at NSU, and their semester ended two days earlier. A survey indicated that a majority of the faculty favored a finals week, and the deans of the various colleges supported the idea. President Webb expressed interest in the proposal and promised to study it. In February, both student and faculty committees endorsed a finals week, and later the faculty council endorsed the proposal. At the beginning of the fall semester, Webb said, "A finals week at NSU is one of those issues that has been studied for years and committed to death. It was time to initiate the concept and we did it." After years of discussion, final exams were spread out over the week of December 15-19, providing more time for both students and faculty.<sup>39</sup>

The arrival of spring in Tahlequah coincided with Renaissance '80 Week. Scores of activities ranged from a fishing tournament, dramatic and musical productions, and a film festival to academic contests for high school students, nationally-known speakers, art exhibits, and athletic contests. An estimated 30,000 people were attracted to campus by a variety of events designed to appeal to almost everyone. NBC economic affairs correspondent Irvine R. Levine, in a Thursday evening speech, predicted a continuation of double-digit inflation; the morning audience of John Erling, a KRMG morning radio host, listened while he interviewed students and faculty, including 100-year-old Dr. T.L. Ballenger, emeritus professor of history, from the snack bar of the university center. The most controversial part of the program was the Wednesday evening speech of Jean Dixon, a nationally known psychic. A group of "Concerned Christian Citizens" of Tahlequah publicized their objection to the university's inviting "an astrologer and fortune-teller," whose presentation, they claimed, was "a grave offense to the Christian faith." Their appeal to the board of regents did not prevent Dixon's appearance. Her presentation charmed an audience of some 800, but her prediction of a racial civil war in the United

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<sup>39</sup> Dan Pierce, "Faculty, Students Comment On Proposed Finals Week," "Finals Week Plans Again Examined By Students, Staff," *Northeastern*, 8 February 1980, 2. "Reviewing the Year Of Campus Events," *Northeastern*, 14 May 1980, 2. "Council Approves Final Exam Week," *Northeastern*, 3 September 1980, 1. "First Final Exams Week Scheduled for Dec. 15-19," *Northeastern*, 10 December 1980, 1.

States in the mid-1980s did not help her reputation for accurately foreseeing the future.<sup>40</sup>

Renaissance '80 was part of Webb's larger plan to give the university a reputation as a vibrant, progressive campus. Speakers and entertainers with national reputations appeared on the Northeastern campus on a regular basis. News articles and promotional literature advertising their appearances circulated widely throughout northeastern Oklahoma, across the state, and beyond drawing large audiences to campus and creating a link between the university and stimulating cultural and intellectual activity in the public mind. Among the entertainers who appeared in Tahlequah between 1980 and 1984 were Ray Price, Ronnie Milsap, Crystal Gayle, Buddy Rich, Mickey Gilley, Michael Martin Murphy, Tammy Wynette, the Beach Boys, Count Basie, Merle Haggard, and Lee Greenwood. The school also hosted a Shakespeare festival, ABC-TV news anchor Howard K. Smith, TV personality Art Linkletter, and presidential advisor Hamilton Jordan<sup>41</sup>

Ironically in an administration determined to create a favorable public image, the student newspaper was allowed remarkable latitude in reporting university news. Near the end of the spring 1980 semester, the staff of the *Northeastern* thanked the administration for allowing them to report the news without censorship, suggesting, "this has not always been the case at NSU." In June a muckraking article, that would have been spiked in most college newspapers, underscored the remarkable degree of freedom allowed NSU journalism students. A reporter interviewed students concerning submission of a paper required in a graduate research course. Most indicated that unless the paper were typed by a pool of typists approved by the professor, including his wife and daughters, the chances that he would accept it were slim. Knowledge of this unsavory scheme was widespread, and a least one faculty member had raised the issue with the graduate dean, who dismissed the complaint without investigation. Even after the article appeared, the graduate dean asserted that she "did not believe a word of it." When questioned about the matter by the regents, Webb said the professor's wife was no longer in the typing business. By that time

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<sup>40</sup> Dan Pierce, "Renaissance Week Successful; Over 30,000 Attend Events," *Northeastern*, 30 April 1980, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Jim Killackey, "Northraster State Gearing Up in Anticipation of New University in Tulsa," *Daily Oklahoman*, 21 February 1982.

the dean of the college of education offered several "suggestions" to the professor, which effectively ended the approved typing pool. More than a decade later, student personnel on the *Northeastern* remained remarkably free to report news that did not always reflect positively on the university. When other state schools began to clamp down on the freedom of their campus newspapers to report information of a critical nature, the editor of the *Northeastern* praised administrators for not restricting the ability of the paper's staff to report the truth.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "A Free Campus Press," *Northeastern*, 7 May 1980, 2. Juanita Freeman, Graduate Students Question Professor's Thesis Procedures," *Northeastern*, 18 June 1980, 1, 4. Kathy Walker, "Adams Article Long Overdue," Jodell Kuehi Stonehocker, "Adams Article Questioned; New Faculty Positions OK'd," "Typing Policies Revised," *Northeastern*, 23 July 1980, 1. *Denzil Hamilton*, "NSU retains free press midst college censorship," *Northeastern*, 1 September 1994, 7.