

# A Riverboat Gambler's Utopian Experiment

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## Abstract

In a seven-year study of new experimental colleges, Grant and Riesman (1978) report that within those schools “The utopian impulses are strong, representing a search for a more perfect union.” One of the most radical of those experiments was Minnesota Metropolitan State College (MMSC). In addition to having no campus, the school had no classes, no grades, no academic terms, and no lower division courses. This article is an historical ethnography of the early years of that utopian experiment and its radical educational innovations. It focuses on President David E. Sweet (the “Riverboat Gambler” in the title of this article) and his band of “committed amateurs and well-trained professionals,” who forged a charismatic community. A devout Christian Scientist, Sweet rejected the idea that creating heaven on earth was just a figure of speech. As a matter of faith, He believed that the Kingdom of Heaven has the spiritual potential of manifesting itself in the present—in particular, at Metropolitan State.

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## Introduction

My experience was the definition of transformation. The school was transforming, daily. Everybody was transforming. It was so remarkable,

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so energetic. Metro State transformed me from being a pharmaceutical salesperson to a deputy press secretary for the governor of Minnesota in 14 months. Is this a great university or what?

—Jim Lukaszewski, '74, (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 38)

On a cold November day in 1971, two women were walking in downtown St. Paul. They were inside a second story-level “skyway” (enclosed tunnels between buildings), Minnesota’s answer to the harsh winds of winter. They paused before an ill-lit and unfinished office. Situated above Walgreen’s Drug Store, newspapers of the era described the space as “austere” and “gloomy.” “This is a college?” one asked looking at the cardboard sign that read ‘Minnesota Metropolitan State College.’ Her companion shrugged. “Things are different now, I guess” (“Minn. Met State College ‘. . . To try the untried,’” 1971, p.14).

Its location was not the only unconventional characteristic of Minnesota Metropolitan State College (MMSC). In addition to having no campus, the school had no classes, no grades, no academic terms, and no lower division courses (Anderson, 1972, 1A). As one of only nine senior colleges in the nation, Metropolitan State was using these experimental methods to provide the last two years of a Bachelor’s degree to non-traditional students. Before MMSC even opened its doors in 1971, Clark Kerr, the chairman of the prestigious Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, was proclaiming the school as “perhaps the most innovative institution of higher education in the United States” (“50 Enroll in College,” 1972, p. 10).

In its first 18 months of operation, MMSC (now known as Metropolitan State University) became somewhat of a media sensation. Stories appeared in nine national newspapers and magazines, ranging from *The Washington Post* (Brettingen, 1971) and the *U.S. News and World Report* (“A Different Type of College,” 1971) to *The New York Times* (Malcom, 1972) and the *Saturday Review* (Cass, 1972).

In a seven-year study of new experimental colleges including Metropolitan State, Gerald Grant and David Riesman found that “The utopian impulses are strong, representing a search for a more perfect union” (1978, p. 37). The authors also assert that these non-traditional institutions “approach the status of social movements or generic protests against contemporary American life” (p. 15). One of the most radical of those experiments was Metro State.

I found that seeking the “why” of Metro State was of little explanatory value. Sifting through variables of causation produces a bland sauce; as the historian John Lewis Gaddis quipped, “Aren’t all variables dependent on other variables?” (2004, p. 53-54) “What” was Minnesota Metropolitan State College? Now *there* was a question ripe with explanatory flavor. Max Weber’s research design for *The Spirit of Capitalism and the Prot-*

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*estant Ethic* used heuristic concepts to tease out the historical meaning of individual events and personages.

In the title of this study is used the somewhat pretentious phrase, the *spirit* of capitalism. What is to be understood by it? . . . Such an historical concept, however . . . must be gradually put together out of the individual parts which are taken from historical reality to make it up. Thus the final and definitive concept cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end. (1904-5, p. 47)

Answering the question “what” qualifies as a theoretical explanation when a phenomenon that is already known is “made more intelligible” by reclassifying it. Dray calls this “explanation by concept” (1993, pp. 30-31). Weber’s sociological classic does exactly that: He sought to make more intelligible the rise of capitalism and the Protestant Reformation, and the relationship between them. He eventually came up with the “final and definitive” concepts of the “Protestant ethic” and the “spirit of capitalism.”

In carrying out my research, I used Herbert Blumer’s methodological tool of a “sensitizing concept” to make sense of my findings:

A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition . . . A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes. . . . Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. (1954, pp. 7, 10)

*What was Metro State?* I used the sensitizing concept of a “utopian experiment” as my divining rod in this historical ethnography. The institution’s manifest purpose was academic. Even so, was the charismatic founding president also using the college to pursue a transcendent vision? That question is the subject of this inquiry.

Tom Jones, a Metro State history professor emeritus, once expressed a wish, “I can only hope that some historian will, in the near future, recognize how Metro State’s beginnings and accomplishments reflect the best thinking and idealism of those founding years” (2011, p. 20). This paper seeks to fulfill Jones’ desire. In 1919, Weber described the character of those who pursue impossible dreams, such as founding Metro State:

It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth—that man [and woman] would not have attained the possible unless time and again he [or she] had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man [or woman] must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word. And even those who are neither leaders nor heroes must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. (1946, p. 127)

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### A Strong Leader's Saga

Burton Clark's seminal study of organizational sagas in higher education sets the stage for what was about to transpire at Metropolitan State:

The saga is initially a strong purpose, conceived and enunciated by a single man or a small cadre (Selznick, 1957) whose first task is to find a setting that is open, or can be opened, to a special effort. The most obvious setting is a new organization, building from the top down, appointing lieutenants and picking up recruits in accord with his ideas. (Clark 1972, p. 180)

The newly created Metro State provided the *sweet spot* for David E. Sweet to pursue his saga.

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### Sweet's Intellect and Faith

When she first met David Sweet, Lael Berman was working as the public relations director for the St. Paul Council of Arts and Sciences. He was then a vice chancellor for the Minnesota State College System. They became professional acquaintances while working on a joint program sponsored by the two organizations. Shortly after the 37-year-old Sweet became president of Metropolitan State, Berman called him and expressed interest in the new college. Just four hours later, she found herself sitting across a desk from the man.

Sweet wanted to hire me as a combination publicist, information officer, brochure writer and whatever else fell into the enigmatic abyss called public relations.

"This is a PR person's dream!" he proclaimed. "What we're doing here is very big news! Our techniques, format, and educational approach are going to make history!"

*New York Times* headlines flashed before my eyes! *Time* magazine reporters at my feet! *Life* wanting photos! Cover story in *Newsweek*! (Berman 1973, p. 31)

Berman expressed doubt about her capability to handle the position, stressing her unfamiliarity with higher education. "Sweet's smile was beatific. He wasn't even listening to me. . . . Trust me," said Sweet. "Can you start tomorrow?" (p. 31). Within the hour, Berman had accepted the job.

This short vignette captures the manic charm of a new president who was still somewhat full of himself. Much of what we know about him comes from a presentation of self that he carefully constructed for

public consumption. A hometown newspaper's account of Sweet's appointment affords us a less guarded and more private glimpse of the founding president as a child. Born in Holyoke, Massachusetts, Sweet grew up in Vermont and Tennessee. His older sister described him as a very "precocious child" whose first word was "book." Soon after this event, she claims, the toddler started reading. His sister also asserts that, "he had an I.Q. of 150 when he was tested at nine months of age" Apart from the questionable veracity of these recollections, the remarks suggest familial expectations of young David would produce an intellectual overachiever ("His New College Involves," 1971, p. 3).

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that Sweet sought academic accolades. He graduated magna cum laude from Drury College in 1955. Sweet later earned an M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from Duke University, where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and taught classes. Sweet was also the faculty adviser for the Christian Science organization on campus. He served as a professor at Ohio University and Illinois State University. The future college president then switched to administrative work and spent four years as an academic vice-president at Illinois State before becoming vice chancellor of the Minnesota State College System in 1969. The past president of Illinois State once made a remark about his former employee that captures the cerebral nature of the man, "He has more brilliant ideas in a day than most of us have in a lifetime" (Anderson, 1971, p. 11A). Sweet was a classic intellectual; ideas were his lifeblood.

The topic of Sweet's Ph.D. dissertation—*Three American Interpretations of Max Weber*—holds particular significance for both his biography and the history of Metropolitan State. Sweet devoted 245 pages to an exegesis of works on Weber by Talcott Parsons, C. Wright Mills, and Leo Strauss (1968). This is the typically cautious work of a graduate student; Sweet makes no explicit case for his own "fourth" American interpretation. Nevertheless, the study does provide a subtle foreshadowing of Sweet's particularly reflective use of social theory. Weber's social thought looms large over Sweet's utopian experiment.

One reason he may have found Weber congenial is that of all the major social scientists, this German social theorist provides the most empathetic examination of religious phenomena. Weber's ideas about this-worldly salvation, the non-material factors in history, the Protestant ethic, and the religious roots of charisma all likely resonated with Sweet, both as a political scientist and as a Christian Scientist.

With striking parallelism to the six tenets of Christian Science, Sweet initially established three tenets for Metro State in *An Irregular Guide to MMSC*:

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- We believe that you should have responsibility for, and authority over, your education.
- We believe that you should seek an urban-orientated education.
- We believe that you should direct your education toward the acquisition of competence than toward the accumulation of credits. (Ayers et al., 1972, p. 9)

The college later added two more tenets:

- The college recommends that each student receiving a degree demonstrate a high level of competence in these areas of life: communications and basic learning; the responsibilities of a self-governing member of a self-governing community; work; recreation; and personal development and social awareness. . . .
- The college expects that those upon whom it confers degrees will be life-long, self-directed learners committed to excellence in their learning. (Sweet, Tisinger, & Ayers, 1974, p.2)

Sweet was a devout Christian Scientist. He started each day with religious study. A lay reader in his church, Sweet conducted services on Sundays and Wednesday evenings (Anderson, 1971 p.11A). As a matter of faith, he believed that the Kingdom of Heaven has the spiritual potential of manifesting itself in the present, but only if we give up our sinful and erroneous perceptions of reality. When the president began an early talk to the faculty and staff with a quote from the Book of Proverbs, it was apparent that his self-described “prophetic vision” was about more than just educational reform:

An ancient prophet, a wise observer of mankind, noted many centuries ago, “Where there is no vision the people perish.” . . . No effort to replace what is can prosper unless one has a sense of something better, something more nearly perfect, some clearer sense of the true. And truth is not a future proposition—truth is a present possibility: a present possibility imperfectly realized. . . . But I am convinced we must start, and start soon if we are to ensure the viability of our experiment. (Sweet, 1973b, pp. 1, 4)

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### A Riverboat Gambler

A *Minneapolis Tribune* profile alluded to Sweet’s “reputation for working obsessively on projects he believes in” (Anderson, 1971, p. 11A). Making this new college work was a compulsive task for him. Only his wife and daughters pulling him away from his desk limited his propensity to work evenings and weekends. A colleague once described Sweet as “a person with belief transcending commitment and stamina defying nature” (Berman, 1973, p. 30).

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The \$300,000 the legislature allocated for the college was hardly enough to *plan* a new school, much less to *operate* one. It was fitting that a newspaper headline read, “Unordinary man builds college with promises.” Without much cash on hand, *promises* were often the only capital with which Sweet had to work. Faced with such a meager two-year budget, the new president had two options. A cautious and conventional administrator would hoard the meager funds, initiating a small pilot program only near the end of the second year. A more entrepreneurial executive would bet the bundle, operating a full-blown college within six months. Sweet was a riverboat gambler (Anderson, 1971, pp. 11A).

A reporter wrote about one example of what he called Sweet’s “wheeling and dealing.” He played on the consciences of his six fellow presidents in the Minnesota State system by asking them each to donate to Metropolitan State a faculty member and to pay his or her salary for the first year. Once Sweet got a couple of the presidents to agree, he began to badger each of the others by arguing that everyone else was doing it. By pledging repayment to each school, he soon had a new faculty recruit from most of the campuses (Anderson, 1971, p. 11A).

Sweet’s fundraising schemes were not limited to state coffers. He and G. Theodore Mitau, Chancellor of the Minnesota State College System, quickly headed for Washington, D.C. to meet with Elliott Richardson, Cabinet Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and Sidney Marland, United States Commissioner of Education. Richardson and Marland were obviously impressed—they immediately funneled two grants totaling \$150,000 to MMSC. The big financial windfall came when Sweet convinced the Carnegie Corporation to provide \$213,000 in early December of 1971. He secured additional pocket change when the Hill Family Foundation gave the college \$46,000 and the Bush Foundation came through with another \$40,000 (Sweet 1972, pp. 8-9). These institutions were as much bankrolling David Sweet’s charismatic allure as they were funding the idea of Metropolitan State.

Those episodes bring to mind Grant and Riesman’s remark about certain academic entrepreneurs. This asterisked footnote suggests the authors’ rather skeptical interpretation of these leaders:

Anyone who, like the authors of this essay, has met a number of these founding fathers is impressed on the one hand by their seemingly innocent plausibility, and on the other by the repeated gullibility of their devotees, including not only supposedly shrewd bankers and other donors but also faculty members and students of higher intellectual caliber than the evangelical leaders they follow. (1978, p. 25)

Neither a drinker nor a smoker, Sweet was described by a former boss as the kind of person who attends a conference and actually goes

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to all the meetings. This is not to say the man was without vices—he did enjoy his food. Sweet's frame carried well over 200 pounds and one newspaper profile described him as "portly," another as "husky." He also had a bit of flair about him. He drove a red 1966 Volkswagen convertible and was often seen driving with the top down, sporting huge orange sunglasses (Anderson, 1971, p. 11A).

"Dr. David Sweet, the first president, was the right person during our early days," recalled Mel Henderson, an early faculty member. "He was charismatic and energetic with a very uplifting oratory style similar to a Southern Baptist minister" (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 12). In the weeks following his appointment, the new president was constantly on the move. He decided early on that he would focus on 'external' relations, while delegating considerable authority for 'internal' operations to Douglas Moore, his recently named vice-president. While this may have been his intent, there is little evidence that he ever relinquished much authority. Within a three-month period, Sweet had met with the governor, numerous legislators, state officials, fellow presidents of public and private colleges, corporate executives, labor leaders, and newspaper editors.

Founding faculty member Bob Fox recalls the faculty and staff's initial gathering:

On the first day we all showed up and David Sweet was there. I remember him waving his arms, as he often did when he was speaking, and bouncing up and down on his toes as he totally mesmerized all of us. He was a charismatic leader and he was able to persuade us to do many things. (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 9)

As effective as he was on a one-to-one basis, it was apparent that what the president relished was an audience. It mattered little if it was a labor convention, a rotary club, a professional society, a civic organization, or a college staff meeting—he knew how to work a crowd. No matter how many times he gave the same speech, Sweet always got excited when he was talking about MMSC. He sometimes made commitments during those appearances that his exasperated aides knew would be nearly impossible to fulfill. There was no denying that he had a spellbinding effect on an audience—they knew he wasn't "talking just about a new college, but a new form of higher education" (Anderson, 1971, p.11A).

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### Was Sweet a Utopian?

What we know of the founding president corresponds closely to what Karl Mannheim called the utopian mentality:

A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality

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within which it occurs. . . . Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at that time. (1936, p. 192)

According to Peyton Richter, there are three types of utopian thinkers. First, there is the “utopian designer,” an architect of an ideal society. Next is the “utopian artist” who presents his or her dream in fictional form. Finally, there is the “utopian organizer,” a thinker who is primarily interested in bringing the vision into existence. Richter suggests numerous characteristics that a utopian organizer must possess, including knowledge, patience, perseverance, and self-confidence. However, these attributes alone are not enough—“it also requires that the leader have personal charisma” (1971, p. 5).

What type of utopian thinker was Sweet? Even though he was the architect of an ideal college, he was too pragmatic and action-oriented to devote much time to philosophical speculation. He sought to organize an experiment in living that would test his dream in practice. Richter has a generic description of the utopian organizer that might well be a portrait of Sweet during those early years:

Following a plan that he sometimes has to modify in light of actual conditions and unexpected obstacles, he proceeds to create a set of social relationships and build a system of institutions which will bring into existence, at least temporarily, the exemplification of a utopian scheme. (1971, p. 4)

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### A Charismatic Community

Early accounts of Metro State used a variety of words and phrases to describe David Sweet: “A breath of fresh air,” “zealot,” “ambitious,” “crusader,” and “a new breed of college president.” However, the one adjective most commonly attached to the new president, both within the college and by outside observers, was “charismatic.” Is this a useful concept to further our understanding of Sweet and his relationship to the new college? Roth and Schuchter (1977) have argued, “In popular usage, ‘charisma’ has lost any distinctive meaning and merely denotes a personal attribute, the glamour and attractiveness of persons and objects” (p. 128). While contemporary usage has debased the idea, I argue that charisma remains a useful concept for analysis, if we can rehabilitate its sociological significance.

Charisma derives from the Greek word for grace. Early Christian usage referred to charisma as the gift of grace. Rudolph Sohm, a German theologian, was the first to develop this idea in the modern era. He was primarily concerned with the religious connotations of charisma (We-

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ber 1978). Max Weber is probably the scholar most identified with this construct, which he had borrowed from Sohn. Weber, however, extends the idea into the secular realm:

Charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits. Its bearer seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his mission. If those to whom he feels sent do not recognize him, his claim collapses; if they recognize it, he is their master as long as he “proves” himself. (1978, p. 1113)

Dorothy Emmet, a British social philosopher, criticizes the “Teutonic” nature of Weber’s definition and argues that it is “a romanticized kind of personal authority inspiring blind obedience in devoted followers” (1958, p. 233). Emmet refines Weber’s definition when she distinguishes between a “hypnotic” kind of leadership used for the purposes of domination and a more inspirational leadership that can, “strengthen and train people’s wills, yet leaving them free to work constructively on their own account” (p. 235).

Miriam Meyers, Sweet’s first Executive Assistant and soon thereafter a faculty member, provides a brief portrait of Sweet’s inspirational style of leadership:

Certainly, our first president was the charismatic leader. He provided the vision we drew our support from for years—and from which some still draw their support. This, I think, explains why some newcomers to Metro, mostly ‘unbelievers,’ describe some of us as ‘religious fanatics.’ (1984, p. 6)

Leah Harvey, a faculty member since 1975, captures the sense of community and commitment engendered by the charismatic Sweet:

He was a very big man, about 6’3” or 6’4”. When we first went through accreditation, it was a big deal. The whole institution knew we were going through the process and was involved in it. When we finished that process successfully, he put a sweetheart rose on everybody’s desk, because his name was Sweet. That’s the kind of thing he did. We used to call him the benign dictator; he always wanted the best for everybody. He knew how things should be done and was always willing to share his advice with the rest of us. (2011, p. 18)

A significant aspect of this charismatic relationship is the type of organization it establishes. Weber decreed, “An organized group subject to charismatic authority will be called a charismatic community” (1978, p.243). What are the characteristics of these members and what roles do they play. The sociologist Edward Shils provides some answers:

Those in whom the charismatic propensity is strongest . . . will be the promulgators of the new vision of a better order; those in whom

the charismatic propensities, although not strong enough to permit charismatic originality, are strong enough to respond to such a vision when concretely embodied (and mediated) in a charismatic person, are the likely followers. (1968, p. 389)

Shils further amplifies Weber's observation that a charismatic community usually seeks to disrupt established authority. "Charismatic persons, and those who are responsive to charismatic persons, aspire to larger transformations. They seek to break the structures of routine actions and to replace them with structures of inspired actions" (1968, p. 387).

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### **Feminist Values Permeated the Charismatic Community**

In 1976, Marion Kilson examined the status of women in higher education. She found that in 1971-72 the proportion of women in top-level administrative positions in four-year colleges and universities was miniscule: Woman made up only 3 percent of the presidents, 2.7 percent of directors of development, and 2.7 percent of business managers. "The proportion of tenured women faculty dropped from 17 percent in 1971-72 to 13 percent in 1974-75. Moreover, among women faculty members, the proportion of tenured women dropped from 44 percent in 1971-72 to 27 percent in 1974-75." In four-year institutions, the median salary for women was 82.5 percent of what men earned (Kilson p. 937). She concludes her article with a pithy, yet bleak, quotation from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

If this analysis of the dominant trends for women's status in academe today is correct, we must agree with Lewis Carroll's Red Queen that it will take "all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" (Kilson, p. 941)

Given Kilson's data, and the climate of the times for women, a 1972 headline in the *Minneapolis Tribune* must have given many readers pause—"Innovative new metropolitan college pioneers in women's liberation too." The article focused on the new college's startling staffing patterns: Women held four of the top seven executive positions, three of first five faculty appointments (then called "advisors"), and made up half of its 35 employees. With this critical mass, females shaped every aspect of the college, nowhere more than its pedagogy (Innovative new metropolitan college pioneers in women's liberation too, p. 2B).

Donna Blacker, a community faculty member and an academic advisor for over 35 years, reflected upon the heritage of a unique, feminist pedagogy practiced at the university:

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What hasn't changed [about Metro State in 40 years] is that the heart of it is what goes on in the classroom. I think we pioneered active learning and a lot of places have picked up on what we did. When you talk about the differences in the classrooms, you can't divorce it from the fact that the institution was born in the heyday of the feminist movement—of second-wave feminism. It had a tremendous effect on the way in which the university developed, even the valuing of teaching, the collaborative environments in the classroom, the group learning. A lot of that was umbilically linked to feminism. (Metropolitan State University. 2011, p.29)

In 1971, 38 percent of female high school graduates ages 25-29 had completed a year or more of college, but only 18 percent had graduated (Smith, p. 11). In *Prospectus II*, the top demographic group that Metro State targeted was “women who had delayed their education because of marriage” (p. 9).

George Rice (1972), a reporter for *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, wrote a long story about those women. He creates a composite student to make his point.

For instance, you are a woman—married, two to three children. You've had a couple of years of college. Quit college to get married. Now you feel you'd like to pick up the threads of your education again. You believe you have talents that would be useful. (p. 1)

He then proceeded to take this hypothetical woman through the process of coming to Metro State: Meeting with an advisor, carrying out a lengthy self-assessment, developing contracts for study, and fulfilling contracts by demonstrating competencies by a variety of means (including competencies already achieved in work or life experience). Rice then highlights why this unconventional approach to higher education was attractive to women: “The student's freedom to work at her own pace, at times and in places most convenient to her, makes MMSC especially attractive to women—both housewives and working women” (p. 1).

In 1971, 39 percent of students enrolled in the last two years of college were women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, p. 4). However, most all of those women were single and between the ages of 18-21. Nevertheless, Sweet and the college staff were disappointed that during the first few months only 40 percent of Metro State's student body was female. They created a special brochure that targeted women and encouraged female students to recruit their friends and associates to enroll. Soon thereafter, 50 percent of Metro State's students pursuing the last two years of college were women. Sweet said it was no accident that the majority of the college's permanent faculty members were women. It was “a deliberate and conscious plan.” He continued:

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To reach women you need women in key positions. To act as “models” to furnish insights. . . . So I consciously set out to find women who would articulate the needs of women. If you don’t have women in decision-making, their needs and aspirations don’t get heeded. (Rice p. 1)

Catherine Warrick (with two doctorates) was the highest-ranking female administrator as Dean of Learning Development. When asked about the high percentage of women on Metro State’s staff, she was straightforward:

I believe it is easier to recruit staff from among highly qualified and talented women simply because they are more available.

Our educational system has militated against exceptional women. The mold was designed when only men were in the field.

Though education has been open to women, the opportunity to *use* that education *in* education has not been open to them as it has to men. (Rice p. 10)

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## Formulating the Doctrine

Chancellor Mitau appointed Sweet president of MMSC on June 28, 1971. In a largely ceremonial gesture, Sweet appointed his former boss a professor of political science at Metropolitan State. By contrast, the founding president designated himself a professor of political philosophy. This distinction is significant. Both men were political scientists, but the discipline was probably too bound to empiricism and the status quo for Sweet’s tastes. He was more comfortable with the normative aspects of the field. The domain of political philosophy, on the other hand, has historically included two tasks: criticizing existing institutions and advocating for an alternative set of institutions (Brown, 1990). Both of these tasks were Sweet’s passion.

The chancellor’s charge to the new president was to “create a new, innovative, non-traditional college” (Mitau, 1971, p. 1). Sweet took him at his word:

That higher education today is in great difficulty, awaiting significant innovation, experimentation, and reform is one of the oft-articulated clichés of this era . . . It remains, however, that most of the innovation and experimentation has amounted to little more than tinkering with the existing system and re-packaging the old models without concern for substantive reform. (Sweet & Moore, 1971, p. 1)

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## The Charter Myth

Barrington Moore asserts that most social change organizations arise out of the failure of institutions to match expectations. In or-

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der to express this dissatisfaction with the status quo, a doctrine emerges:

We may designate such a doctrine as the charter myth of a power-seeking organization. Probably no charter myth has ever been completely static. Instead it undergoes modification and elaboration in response to the vicissitudes of the organization's life. . . . [It] contains a mixture of truth and propaganda. (1962, p. 10)

Sweet began articulating Metropolitan State's charter myth on the day that he became president, June 28, 1971. Within a month, he had composed *Minnesota Metropolitan State College Prospectus* (Sweet & Moore 1971), a first draft of the school's canon. Neither Sweet nor the articles of faith were stagnant. Revised and embellished, Sweet, Moore, and Cardozo updated the earlier document two months later as *Minnesota Metropolitan State College Prospectus II* (1971). Doctrine was so fundamental to Sweet that he had prepared an "Authorized Synopsis" of *Prospectus II* (Schorger 1971). Throughout the early years, those two statements served as the school's manifestos. Although it never appeared in print, Sweet often referred to a forthcoming *Prospectus III*. However, a succession of handbooks and guides do record the evolving educational philosophy of those years.

An early employee recalls receiving those "tablets":

Reaching into the one drawer of his desk, Mr. President pulled out a sheaf of white papers stapled together in the upper left hand corner.

Here's the prospectus,' he said slowly. 'Read it and then let me know what you don't understand.

As Moses took the tablets, I accepted the prospectus, and under one of the four lamps provided the college I read the 30-page single-spaced document that was to be a guiding light in the restructuring of higher education. (Berman, 1973, p. 31)

*Prospectus* and *Prospectus II* were Metropolitan State's charter myth. In her study of the college, Mary Brekke provides further evidence that confirms Lael Berman's experience. She reported that the first five faculty members received either one or both of these documents for their orientation to the institution and its mission (1990). One reporter observed that *Prospectus* was "liberally sprinkled with criticism of higher education" (Dawson, 1971, p. 25). *The New York Times* observed that Sweet "delights in snubbing traditional academic procedures" (Malcom, 1972, p. 33). His critique of academia drew heavily upon the findings of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and Frank Newman's *Report in Higher Education* (1971) that the Ford Foundation funded and the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) sponsored.

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### **An Ideology in Search of a Student Constituency**

MMSC's principal objective was to end the exclusivity of a college education. According to Sweet, the college's potential clientele was the 720,000 metropolitan area residents who are over 25 years of age and lack a college diploma. *Prospectus* argues that most colleges and universities "discriminate against the student who is not 18-21 years old and a recent high school graduate" (Sweet & Moore, 1971, p. 9). These institutions either ignored non-traditional students or shuffled them off to an extension division that was "adjunct and subordinate" to their regular programs. In *Prospectus*, junior college transfers and graduates of vocational technical schools still headed the list of potential MMSC students.

The order shifted significantly in *Prospectus II*. Adults who were college dropouts, adults who had the equivalency of two years of college, and adults who needed retraining at the collegiate level now occupy the top three spots. Metropolitan State particularly sought to serve three demographic groups: women who had delayed their education because of marriage and children; working people who were alienated from the middle-class nature of academia; and, those people living in poverty who found college both exorbitantly priced and hostile. While Metropolitan State claimed to be a college for working adults, *working-class* adults would have probably been closer to the truth. David Sweet was a radical egalitarian: "MMSC is not, in short a college for those who already have colleges—it is for those who do not have a college" (Sweet, Moore & Cardozo, 1971, p. 9). Metropolitan State's mission was to democratize the baccalaureate.

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### **Deschooling Teaching and Learning**

What kind of faculty should teach these non-traditional students? Again, Sweet took his cue from Frank Newman's *Report in Higher Education*: "The first course of action is for colleges and universities to leaven their faculties with practitioners who are outstanding in their jobs, and eager to bring ingenuity to bear on transmitting their own knowledge and confidence" (1971, p. 77). Sweet's disdain for traditional scholars is obvious: "The lay faculty members won't be professional educators who are bored doing the same thing they've done so many times before" (Brettingen, 1971, F10).

*Prospectus II* was even more direct: "a college faculty is typically very good at preparing future college faculty members. It is less good at preparing those who are not going to be college faculty members"

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(Sweet, Moore & Cardozo, 1971, p. 25). Few Metropolitan State students were going to become professors. Consequently, the most important characteristic that was required of all MMSC faculty members was a commitment to teaching the kinds of students who would be attracted to the college.

The president once described the faculty as a band of “committed amateurs and well-trained professionals” (Associated Press, 1971, p. 29). The amateurs would make up the major portion of the faculty. Known as “community faculty” (adjuncts), they would be full-time practitioners of a profession and part-time teachers at Metropolitan State. It was less important that they have conventional academic credentials, and more important that they could skillfully apply knowledge to the world of work and to the social problems of an urban community:

Each community faculty member might be compared to a library book which students consult and use in a variety of ways and patterns. Even as some students consult a book only briefly—read a paragraph, a page, or a chapter—so some students will only have brief encounters with a particular community faculty member. . . . On the other hand, even as a student may study and analyze a book in great detail, so he may work in depth with a community faculty member. (Sweet, Moore & Cardozo, 1971, p. 24)

There was also a small core of full-time faculty (there were only five members in the beginning), most of whom would have a Ph.D. and significant teaching experience. *Prospectus II* quite emphatically declared, “The college will not be a research institute” (p. 22). The only scholarship that was acceptable was scholarly activity that contributed to a faculty member’s success as a teacher. The college was to be exclusively devoted to teaching students. These professionals were to be primarily “educational brokers,” assisting students in matching needs and interests with the appropriate educational resources. In truth, the core faculty served primarily as advisors. If they taught, their pupils would not be students but community faculty. The professionals were to educate the amateurs about current teaching practices and bring them up to speed on current developments in the academic disciplines. The community faculty, in turn, was to keep the core faculty current on the application of knowledge (Sweet, Moore & Cardozo, 1971).

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### Transcending the Disciples

The nontraditional aspect of the university was a good match for me. I was also very nontraditional in my career—I was interested in civic initiatives and less concerned about salaries, and Metro offered me the opportunity to use my life experience as a student. The Metro classroom

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experience was also unique, because, as a student, you interacted directly with the community. This made the classes valid and authentic. —Yusef Mgeni, '74. (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 17)

What were students to learn? MMSC rejected the conventional academic organization of knowledge into disciplines. Sweet believed that higher education should ideally be concerned with five broad areas of knowledge. The student would develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to accomplish the following goals: learn throughout a lifetime; develop and grow as a person; function as a responsible citizen; participate in cultural-recreational activities; and, practice a vocation that affords adequate security.

Mainstream institutions have perpetuated, according to Sweet, a split between “professional” and “liberal” education. Although a traditional liberal arts degree has stressed self-development and civic knowledge, *Prospectus* (1971) attributes the decline of liberal studies to its lack of vocational preparation. In turn, professional baccalaureate education is characterized as too “highly vocational and highly specialized.” Professional training gives very little attention to self-development, civic education, or recreational competence. Consequently, MMSC strove to unite liberal and professional education in the baccalaureate program.

While Metro State students may have achieved several competencies in a field of study, the college had no majors. “MMSC presently grants only one degree,” Sweet wrote, “the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Liberal Studies.” “While the degree represents work within the five competency areas,” he continued, “. . . all of these must, however, be pursued from the point of view of their relation to life and work in the cities” (Sweet, 1972b, p. 7).

One major teaching strategy the College will employ is the practicum—internships, apprenticeships, participation in community projects, and other forms of “learning-by-doing.” MMSC staff arrange for such student experiences, usually under the supervision of community faculty members, which combine the practical with the theoretical. (Sweet, 1972b, p. 9)

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### No Classes, No grades, No Campus, No Academic Terms

How students were to learn was perhaps the most distinctive feature of the early Metropolitan State. The college would replace traditional academic programs with a curriculum that was tailor-made by each student. The degree was competence-based, defined in terms of the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that a student was expected to learn

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and demonstrate. There was a strong “experiential” dimension at MMSC. The college would grant a degree based on competence or mastery of a skill, not on classes or credit hours accumulated.

In fact, there were no classes at Metropolitan State in the early days. Each student negotiated an individualized contract with an advisor. In this document, the student set the educational goals, the means of achieving those goals, and the assessment of learning. Once a student-faculty committee had approved a contract, the student pursued this individualized program at a self-directed pace. The school also scrapped the conventional approach to measuring progress and achievement—there were no grades. Instead, the student received a written evaluation of his or her work. In place of the usual list of courses and calculation of grade point average, the student acquired a narrative transcript. This document would record in detail the competencies sought, the manner of achievement, and the name and qualifications of the evaluator.

I have a sign in my office that says “Imagine.” One of the great things about Metro is that it lets students—not only lets students but encourages students to imagine what they really want their education to be and what it could be—opening up their possibilities, their opportunities. We’re not just saying, “Oh you’re interested in ‘such and such’ then you should be a ‘such and such major.’ It doesn’t happen that systematically or that routinely at Metro. It happens through a process of discovery and reflection and imagining opportunity—opening up. — Marcia Anderson ’76, community faculty and academic advisor. (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 22)

Utopia comes from the Greek word meaning “no place.” “It has been called a college without walls,” Sweet once remarked. “I would rather refer to it . . . as a college with the community as its campus.” It was fitting that a college with utopian aspirations should be both “no place” and “every place.” For classrooms, the president decreed, the college would use schools, factories, laboratories, churches, libraries, businesses, museums, auditoriums, streets, and parks (Sweet, Moore & Cardozo, 1971, p. 15).

Sweet’s ideal college defied not only the conventional idea of place but of “time” as well. The traditional academic calendar was set in stone: schools opened in September and closed in June, the year divided into quarters or semesters, the workweek ran from Monday morning through Friday afternoon, classes met between the daytime hours of 8:00 and 4:00. Quite to the contrary, Sweet declared that Metropolitan State “will run throughout the year, every day of the week, around the clock” The goal was that no student would have to take any portion of his or her program during the regular workday (“A Different Type of College: It comes to the student,” 1971, p. 41).

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### The First Commencement

Professor emerita Miriam Myers recently reminisced about those early days:

I would say the most moving experiences I had were graduations. You watched all these fine people who had delayed their education and their dreams and went back to school. One of my favorite things was the way their kids would yell out, “Way to go, Mom!” and there would be cheers from the audience. That was really precious. (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 7)

The pilot program launched in February 1972 with 50 students. Just one year later, the school had alumni—12 students had graduated. Sweet took the opportunity of this first commencement to announce the “certainties” he had extrapolated from the experiment. These convictions were to be guideposts for the future:

- First. The college must never acquire a campus of its own.
- Second. The college must remain faithful to the tasks of teaching. It must not be seduced by the glamour or prestige of research.
- Third. At MMSC the student must continue to have responsibility for, and authority over, his or her own education.
- A fourth certainty is . . . [that] we must remain committed to competency-based education . . . We must not fall back into the tender trap of education-by-a-formula-of-courses, credits, and grade point averages. (Sweet, 1973a, pp. 2-3)

Sweet was sensitive to the criticism, coming from without as well as within, that the school had more freedom than most students could handle. At MMSC’s first commencement, he fired back at the critics: “Most passionately I believe we must reject the idea that the college is ‘right’ for certain kinds of students and ‘wrong’ for other kinds” (Sweet, 1973a, p. 3). He was fully aware of the contradictions involved in this experiment: Creating a college dedicated to freedom in a society that was increasingly demanding conformity from its members.

First, very little in the student’s prior encounter with educational institutions prepares him for accepting responsibility for designing his own college education. On the contrary, previous educational experience will likely have taught him what he must do to be “educated.” The college must therefore teach many (probably most) students how to design their own education. (Sweet, Moore, & Cardozo, 1971, p. 28)

Sweet concluded that first commencement address by quoting the founder of Christian Science, Mary Eddy Baker:

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The entire purpose of true education is to make one not only know the truth but live it—to make one enjoy doing right, make one not work in the sunshine and run away in the storm, but work amidst clouds of wrong, injustice, envy, hate; and wait on God, the strong deliverer, who will reward righteousness and punish iniquity. (Sweet 1973a, p. 5)

### Conclusion

That genuine artistry which, among the historians, Ranke possessed in grand measure, manifests itself through its ability to produce new knowledge by interpreting already *known* facts according to known viewpoints. (Weber, 1949, p. 112)

Was the college a utopian experiment? The United States has had a long history of utopian communities. Although sociologists have conducted many of the classic studies of utopian organizations, the discipline has never known quite what to do with utopias. Rosabeth Moss Kantor's *Commitment and Community* (1972) makes a significant contribution toward solving this conceptual and classificatory problem.

In a study that includes both historical and contemporary communities, Kantor discovered three different ideological critiques of American society that have animated citizens to found utopian communities—religious in the first two centuries, politico-economic in the nineteenth century, and psychosocial in the 1960s and 1970s. She argues that the three threads have common denominators. They condemn the established order as “sinful, unjust or unhealthy. They stress the possibility of perfection through restructuring social institutions. . . . And they often lead to a single development: The utopian community or commune” (p. 8).

Kantor divides contemporary utopias into two categories or ideal types: “retreat” communes and communities with a “mission.” The first type truly sought to escape—in both time and space. These groups nostalgically attempted to return to a romanticized past and hoped to escape the ills of modern society by isolating themselves, often in a rural setting. By contrast, communities with a mission had a core of committed members who were involved in the larger society through service, often in an urban setting. These “service utopias” targeted a constituency and then set out to transform the lives of its members (p. 191).

Kantor notes that these service communities were quite often involved in education. In the nineteenth century, educational institutions like Antioch and Oberlin affiliated with utopian communities. Additionally, free schools are a contemporary example of service groups. “To be organized as a school . . . or learning community also makes it possible for the group both to generate and elaborate its own ideology and to ensure members know these beliefs deeply and intimately” (1972, p. 194).

Grant and Riesman (1978) capture the *esprit de corps* of recent experimental colleges:

Each of these experiments has a sense of mission. We suspect that many faculty who are attracted to them are not only dissatisfied with competitive life in the multiversity but yearn for a sense of identity and esprit. They want to join an institution that is capable of evoking the deep loyalties of the whole self and of engendering all-out efforts. They want to believe. (p. 33)

Where does MMSC fit into this typology? The early leaders certainly espoused a radical critique, based on psychosocial principles, of the conventions of academia. Sweet and his lieutenants formulated this utopian ideology in *Prospectus* and *Prospectus II*. Subtler, but no less influential, was the president's belief in Christian Science. For Sweet, creating Heaven on Earth was not just a figure of speech (1973b, p. 1).

Metropolitan State was also a laboratory for social change. Those utopians sought to serve a particular population, "those who do not have a college" (Sweet, Moore & Cardozo 1971, p. 9). The college's distinct mission was to create what Kantor (1972) called "liberating situations" that would allow for the "personal growth" of the school's non-traditional students (p. 7). The founding president and his cadre defined and practiced teaching as a service (and subversive) activity—thus deepening their sense of institutional commitment, and thereby bonding leaders and followers into a charismatic community.

*What* was Minnesota Metropolitan State College? I contend that while the institution's stated purpose was academic, in fact, a charismatic founding president was simultaneously transforming the college into a utopian experiment—a strange brew of educational and religious tenets. Kantor claims, "Utopian communities are society's dreams" (1972, p. 237). David Sweet and his band of "committed amateurs and well-trained professionals" pursued a noble dream. Their calling, ultimately, was to demonstrate to the world the discrepancy between what is, and what ought to be.

Yet Metro State was not all wine and roses in the early years. Bob Fox, a professor emeritus, recalled the grueling workload:

We did a time survey—I was used to that because I was practicing law. I suggested that if we kept track of the time we were spending, we could improve what we were doing. We all did that for a period and I remember we were averaging about 100 hours per week in what we called "Metro time." (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 9)

Faculty and staff worked 12 months a year, often on weekends. Sweet thought nothing of regularly calling employees in the evenings. Metro State appears to have been a "greedy institution," demanding an

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undivided commitment (Coser, 1974). Miriam Meyers captured the cost of that devotion:

By the third year of its existence even the college's most energetic and committed faculty [members] were burning out. I have found Neil Postman's words in *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* most appropriate. "The trouble with being a Utopian, of course, is that it is a form of self-flagellation and is likely to leave one distraught or cranky or devoid of all interest in the subject." (1984, p. 6)

If Sweet had a significant shortcoming during his six-year tenure, it was his lack of administrative gravitas in an increasingly bureaucratic institution. Judy Pendergrass, a faculty advisor and director of admissions, saw the president as Metro State's "heart and soul, the backbone. He was the one who said we can do this when times get scary." Still, she also recognized Sweet's most glaring deficiency:

His reach was always greater than his grasp; his appetite was always greater than what he could handle. David had enormous tolerance for ambiguity, more than anybody I've known. He didn't want structure, didn't believe in structure, didn't need it, but the rest of the world does. On the upside, it really contributed to and fostered that intellectual freedom we all liked, but could we have made more headway had we been a little more structured in the beginning? Probably so. (Metropolitan State University, 2011, p. 14)

President David E. Sweet resigned from Metro State on January 20, 1977 to accept the presidency of Rhode Island College (RIC), a traditional teachers' college. Publicly, he stated that he both sought a new challenge and a desire to return to his native New England. There may have been private reasons as well. As one faculty member recently stated, under conditions of anonymity, "But by then, people close to him knew he was becoming disillusioned with the 'dream.'" After seven years at RIC, where he transformed the institution into a multi-purpose college, Sweet died suddenly at age 51. True to his Christian Science faith, he had remained at home, refusing medical treatment, as he grew increasingly ill. He passed away on September 16, 1984, apparently from a diabetic seizure and cardiac arrest (United Press International, 1984, September 18).

"The sincere man," David Riesman once said, "is the one who believes his own propaganda" (Berger, 1963, p. 109). David Sweet was a sincere man. However, by the end of his tenure in 1977, he had also become a somewhat chastened and disillusioned man: "I began as a naive, romantic idealist," Sweet said. "We thought that if we had some goals, it would somehow take care of itself. It did not." (Anderson, 1977, p. 9C). Perhaps it was an impossible dream that he had pursued. Regardless, Sweet and his colleagues would have agreed with John Leonard: "The romantic

notion of the perfectibility of man is really all we have to sustain us, no matter how illusory it may prove to be . . . The rest is rhetoric, and the romantics have the best rhetoric” (Kantor, 1972, p. 237).

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