Au Revoir General College
Esther Wattenberg
November 5, 2014

The last remnants of a celebrated institution, General College, within the University of Minnesota, will shortly disappear.

With the extinction of this notable college in 2006, a few fragments from its history are worth recalling.

First, a glance at national history. Throughout the tumultuous ‘60’s, urban riots had been shaking American cities to the core. Among the commissions ordered by President Lyndon Johnson to disclose the cause, the Kerner Report’s summary claimed instant attention: the nation was “moving toward two societies—one black, one white . . . separate and unequal.” A large portion of Americans considered themselves permanent outcasts from the American Dream of opportunity and equality.

In 1967, President Johnson, in response to this tragic summary of the nation’s future, declared the “War on Poverty.” One strategy that emerged was a program entitled, “New Careers for the Poor,” the brainchild of two sociologists, Frank Reissman and Arthur Pearl. They argued that poverty was not the result of personal inadequacies or past injustices, but rather from the lack of educational opportunities.

Further, they observed that the nation’s need for unskilled labor had been replaced by a rising demand for workers in a “credentialed society.” The concept of “New Careers” emerged in a 1966 amendment to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

In May, 1967, the University of Minnesota became the first major institution to respond to this challenge to the national educational system. General College became the entry point, not only as a hospitable place for “New Careers,” but as a vital partner. General College, as host to adult learners, became a significant model for the nation.

Congressional testimony was invited in both the House Select Sub-committee on Education and Labor and in a Senate Sub-committee on Education, Arts and the Humanities.
In 2004, former vice-President Walter Mondale presided over a luncheon celebrating the ground-breaking nature of the “New Careers” program.

Vice-President Mondale’s comments that General College within the University of Minnesota had stepped forward in providing leadership for a “just and caring society” in this century was roundly applauded.

Archival materials about the program are available in the Social Welfare History Archives housed in the Elmer L. Andersen Library, and a retrospective summary can be read in the CURA Reporter, Winter, 2005.

Esther Wattenberg
Professor, School of Social Work
Associate, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
University of Minnesota
November 5, 2014

Note: Support services for students who are often first generation and low-income are now lodged in a program in the College of Education and Human Development known as TRIO.