

Merril Berg's vision for Lake Region State College

““You’re not teaching a subject. You’re teaching people.”

That was the mindset Merrill Berg carried during his time as the Lake Region State College president. He not only was around during the college’s early days, but saw it through many exciting expansions and transformations, and sought to combat the school’s initial greatest struggle: enrollment.

The Devils Lake junior college was originally just an extension off of the high school, and only supported around 25-30 students. With the United State’s entry into World War II and students taken away for the military, even this small number had been difficult to maintain.

“After the GIs came back enrollment increased, but it started going back down again around 1952-53,” Berg explains.

“There were too many colleges competing for students. High schools all across the state had expanded their missions and launched little colleges. So the State passed a law that you had to have 100 enrolled to stay in operation. Within a year we made the 100 student mark.”

When President John F. Kennedy signed the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) of 1962 in hopes of training and retraining workers in automotive and technological fields, students became encouraged to attend vocational schools such as Lake Region State College.

“We recruited handicapped individuals through the Anne Carlson School, which helped those who had disabilities,” says Berg. “We also tried to get more women enrolled in our secretary positions, and then later in our nursing program. They really helped us grow.”

Cooking, drafting and surveying were some of the original MDTA courses offered by the college, and since there was no definite building to use, places were found all around town to house these classes. Classes were held in the basement of the Masonic Temple while lunches were served in the court house.

It seemed “Most of the state, three-fourths of the time tried to cut off our legs. They wanted to turn the place into a prison. But it wasn’t hard to get the town’s support for a mill levy for the college,” Berg remembers. There were many struggles, “But I always reminded them that the most important thing is that the teacher must teach. The teacher must teach first and foremost.”

