

J. William Maxwell

1920-2008

PROFESSOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, EMERITUS

B.A. University of Southern California; M.S., Columbia University; Ph.D., University of Iowa
California State University, Fullerton 1960 To 1982

In the fall of 1963 I came to Orange County State College for a one-year appointment to fill in for James (Jim) Alexander while he was on leave to complete his doctorate in education at University of California, Los Angeles. I had finished all course work for the Ph.D. in the School of Journalism and Mass Media at the University of Minnesota, but I had several tests yet to take (languages and orals) as well as completing the dissertation. I was willing to take the one-year appointment (I had a wife and three kids) for no greater reason than to escape Minnesota's winters (summers were quite different, but not a whale of a lot better).

I hit the jackpot. Not only was OCSC about to change its name (to "University"), the college was growing rapidly in one of the fastest growing counties in the country. Within this fast-growing university was a department aptly named Department of Communications, not a department of journalism or even mass media, as so many programs were named across the country.

The man behind this move was Bill Maxwell. Bill had a vision for the program that went beyond "journalism" and also included graduates who were literate in history, sociology, political science, psychology, international affairs, economics and English and literature. This wasn't a nebulous goal on the part of the department; it was built into each emphasis, as we called them then. Bill felt that students must take twelve units in upper-division classes outside of Communications because those courses would provide them with a well rounded education and would help them to report on or work in those fields. Of course, students generally couldn't take those upper-division courses unless they first had taken lower division courses in those disciplines. It was the faculty's responsibility to advise students to take those pre-requisite courses as they took their general education courses. That meant the students had to make a decision to major in Communications early in their university career so that they had faculty advisement within the major. The requirement really affected transfer students from community colleges (we called them junior colleges in those days) more than CSUF's students because some of them, already transferring in as juniors, had to take the lower division course requirements that qualified them to take the upper division courses we required. Understand, those twelve units were outside of Communications courses, yet they were required as a part of our major. In other words, Bill was sacrificing those twelve units so that students had a better understanding of the people with whom they would work and the fields about which they would write or promote. If no man is an island, then neither is a discipline. Those twelve units cost the department FTES, but Bill argued it was a necessary sacrifice. In this concept, Bill was ahead of his time, not only in our department, but, as far as I know, the University as well.

He had a broad vision for the program and the field, which was the reason he named it Communications rather than Journalism or Mass Media. His program was going to be much larger and more comprehensive in producing professionals in several fields: journalism (newspapers and magazines), photography, advertising, public relations, whatever else came down the pike. For a period of time, when technology was a growing field in Orange County and elsewhere in Southern California, we had a program in Technical Communications. He also saw the need to serve the community, including the University; we had a student newspaper and a student magazine (a yearbook was phased out early, and now there is a television program.) These programs not only served the University community, they helped students grapple with the realities of producing such programs and having professional skills (developing skills, maybe, but well honed skills, nevertheless).

Under Bill's leadership the Internship program became a major part of outreach to the community even while it gave our students an experience that we could not give them in the classroom. It later would become one of the largest if not the largest such program in the country. Students gained invaluable experience and contacts when they sought jobs. How much better to get a recommendation for a job from someone in the field for whom you have worked than from faculty alone.

If the department had focused entirely on journalism, that is newspaper and magazine training, the department would never have developed and grown to its present size.

I arrived the year the University was framing the plans for the Humanities Building. Bill was doing the justification and planning for the second floor, which would largely be dedicated to the department, as well as some space on the third floor. I saw a side to Bill that enabled the department, which was still small and only beginning to grow in numbers, to commandeer space far greater than our FTES justified. I gained a new appreciation for the phrase "gaming the system." I won't go into how he did it but the result was a second floor designed for every program in the department. If I remember correctly, one room on the north side of the building, was used by other departments as well, and we shared a lecture room on the third floor with the Humanities Division. The location of these rooms and offices on one floor gave a coherence to the department that would not have been possible if we had been scattered throughout the building and in different buildings, as happened later and is true today. Growth brings its own problems.

I hit the jackpot in other ways as well. That first Christmas break—remember, I'm signed on for only one year—I worked long hours with Bill in preparing the plans for the space we hoped to justify and occupy in the new Humanities Building. I had had some training, as well as considerable background and interest, in architectural design. We were facing a deadline. Bill wrote the justifications for the space; I showed where it would go and what it would look like. Christmas eve, I believe it was, we finished. Bill gave me a \$20 bill from his own pocket to treat the kids. Twenty dollars doesn't sound like much today, but in December 1963 it was the real deal. I didn't expect it, but I didn't turn it down, either. This didn't come from a department fund, it came from his wallet.

But that's not what I mean by "jackpot." One would have to go back several decades for twenty dollars to qualify as a jackpot. No, the jackpot I hit was that Bill Maxwell was a decent

human being and a matchless department chair. When Jim Alexander returned the next fall from his doctoral leave, we didn't have enough majors/FTES to justify three full-time faculty. Bill arranged with the Humanities Division head to allow me to teach English part time in addition to a couple of journalism classes. Bill even allowed me to pick up a class he had taught, World Communications Systems. I taught it the remainder of my career. With his own interest and background in international affairs/education, my own extensive education and experience with those systems (World, Communist, and International, which dealt with wire services, BBC-type services, etc.) might have gone for naught if he had been a different person and a selfish chairman.

Bill believed students need a broad education, which was the reason for what we called "Collateral Courses," those twelve units already mentioned. But within our general field of communications, he wanted students to know more than the "how to". He wanted them to know the "what, so what, and why." For this reason we developed generalized upper division courses in communications history, world com, law, communication issues, etc. I was a generalist, so I got to teach a couple of these courses each year, but he made an effort for each professor to teach one or more of them in addition to courses in the faculty member's specialty.

Was Bill perfect as a chair? I think not, but he was "perfect" in the areas that mattered, such as freedom to teach and comment and support where it counted.

Many years after I arrived, Bill recommended termination of one of the young faculty members over a personal matter. The department personnel committee supported the faculty member based on his teaching record. I objected, vociferously, in a letter to the President. Bill also got a copy of my letter. The point...? *Never* did I feel any blowback from Bill. In retrospect, I think I felt free to object not only because I was tenured but also, because I instinctively knew how Bill would react.

I could truthfully write to Bill, when he retired from the chairmanship, that we could not have been blessed with a better chairman. The University, the Department, and later the School of Communications, our faculty, and thousands of students who now are alumni owe an incalculable debt to the dedication, insights, professionalism, and decency of J. William Maxwell.

My thanks to Carolyn Johnson, Associate Professor of Communications, Emeritus, for proofing and editorial suggestions. Carolyn probably knows Bill's later years better than any living faculty member.

Submitted by

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