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Economics takes both traditional and contemporary paths

By Kathy Pomaville Pate

Innovation was the buzzword of the 1960s as technology exploded and altered the world's way of doing business.

"When I was hired by OU in 1969, I remember I saw a large, Wang electronic calculator in the office," says David Doane, professor, SBA's Department of Decision and Information Sciences. "It could add, subtract, multiply, divide and find square roots. I thought, 'Wow! This place is really cutting edge.'"

OU's hunger for innovation moved well beyond calculators. The charter faculty contemplated a new approach to prepare students for careers in both business and non-profit organizations. Until this point, OU followed the traditional approach for a small liberal arts college by having a business program within the College of Arts and Sciences, allowing students to earn a BA in Economics and Business Administration.

In 1969, Oakland University took a bold step by establishing the School of Economics and Management (SEM). The school boasted nine faculty members and an eclectic mix of coursework that was atypical of business schools. Students could chose from a BA in Economics, a BS in Economics or a BS in Business Administration. This would ultimately lay the groundwork for the debut of the School of Business Administration in the 1980s.

There was a growing consensus in the 1960s and 1970s that business education should avoid narrow specialization and should instead provide a broader range of coursework and flexibility. There was also a growing minority that viewed education as a means of self-fulfillment and finding one's identity, rather than simply achieving employment.

"We were quite unusual in our approach," says Doane. "Economics professors were teaching courses with titles like 'Creativity' and 'Problem Perception.' Ironically, we weren't offering traditional classes in accounting, finance, marketing or information systems."

OU garnered a lot of press for its unique curriculum and teaching methods during that era. However, marketplace demands and student expectations began to shift once more.

"Students drifted away from economics because it didn't lead to a specific job. Business degrees with specific skills were more marketable," says John Tower, who served in various roles as dean, associate dean and professor from 1968-1999, and again from 2004-2006.

The '70s marked a time of program growth and change, including the introduction of courses and majors in several business areas. This also led to the expansion of the faculty beyond just economists with the hiring of faculty in organizational behavior, accounting, marketing, finance and management information systems. Recognizing the need for a traditional undergraduate business program in the mid-1980s, SEM reorganized into what is now OU's School of Business Administration.

Reflecting on the early years of SEM, Doane and Tower say that college life was radically different in the 1970s than it is today. One notable difference was a smaller faculty and fewer students, which fostered camaraderie and friendships beyond the classroom.

"We took field trips to downtown Detroit," says Tower. Doane remembers faculty and students gathering in Alfred Wilson's clubhouse to enjoy drinks and dancing on weekends.

While marketplace demands, student expectations, and cultural nuances changed over the course of 40 years, one thing remained the same – OU's commitment to innovation.

SUMMARY
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