

"Federation Corner" column  
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## Getting to know the Real Montgomery College

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Montgomery College is in the news these days in some very unflattering ways. The first is because the communities who live near the former Maryland College of Art and Design (MCAD) on Georgia Avenue, now owned by the Montgomery College Foundation, want this land to become a park. Although the College and its Foundation were given the MCAD site for free, they want to sell the land to developers for as much money as possible. The second is what is being called "Montgomery College's Union Busting Campaign," documented this week in a four part series that can be read at <http://maryland-politics.blogspot.com/> where the College is being accused of interfering with the right of adjunct professors to consider joining a union.

I think it's time that a new generation of county leaders and residents be introduced to what I call "The Real Montgomery College." From 2000-2002, I was part of a group who fought to stop the College from building its Cultural Arts Center in South Silver Spring's historic Jesup Blair Park because of the irreversible damage that would be done to the park's remaining old growth oak trees and to the setting of the last of the historic Blair family mansions. Against all odds, our group, with the timely help of others, successfully pressured the College to relocate this building to the corner of Georgia and Burlington Avenues, where it is being constructed today.

As I searched for ways to stop the College's building plans for the park, I began to do research about the College that soon became an exhaustive pursuit of the history of how the College grew its campuses and its buildings. What I found were some very embarrassing, even shameful moments in the College's history, as well as long periods of near-reckless behavior where the College fought everyone to try to get its way. By 2002, I had written a 100,000-word manuscript titled "The Real Montgomery College" covering the time period from the early '40s through 2002. In part, as a result of sharing this long-forgotten history with those concerned about the College's behavior in 2002, more people and institutions stood up to the College and forced it to make changes it did not want to make. And now, in 2008, it looks like the College is once again starting to spin out of control, so it is time to once again tell some of those shameful stories of the past.

For decades, the College has complained about not having room to expand its Takoma Park campus, a problem it continues to struggle with to this day. It might surprise you to know that this problem could have been entirely avoided, except that past College officials intentionally chose to ignore the obvious. In 1946, Montgomery Junior College [MJC] began evening classes in World War II surplus government building at B-CC High School. By 1950, the College was ready to move to its own campus. It ended up preferring the former Bliss Electrical School in Takoma Park.

In June [1950], "The [Montgomery County] Board [of Education] discussed further the purchase of Bliss Electrical School for the [MJC]." Then on 7/11/50, "...the Board directed that negotiations be proceeded with for the purchase of the property..., including all land, buildings and equipment... Mrs. Baylor [a board member] voted for the purchase of the property, after stating her position as follows: 'I have prepared a statement in regard to my position in connection with the proposed purchase of the Bliss Electrical School, which I would like to have inserted into the minutes of this meeting. First, the campus of approximately 7 acres is, according to all educational standards, inadequate for a Junior College. **A minimum of 35 acres is desirable.** [Emphasis added] Second, the proximity to the B & O Railroad with its accompanying noise is detrimental to carrying on a school program... However, I want it noted that the proposal for the purchase of the... property has been approved by a committee from the Advisory Council of the Junior College, by the Civic Federation... and by Dean Price. It appears obvious that unless the Bliss Electrical School is

purchased, the [MJC] is doomed to struggle along in its present inadequate quarters. With this in mind, and considering the other factors, I will cast my vote with the majority of the Board'."

The College's leaders, knowing the site was far too small for the College's needs, rationalized the decision based on the price and on their hope that they could always use local parks and schools for all of their athletic programs. Within 5 years, they had outgrown the campus and began looking for ways to expand it, including buying adjacent residential properties as they became available. One did become available, the Grabill Property:

"...The following resolution was adopted [4-2]...That the Grabill property at 703 New York Avenue... is needed as additional property for the [MJC], and... that the Superintendent be authorized to make the purchase of this property in the name of the Board of Education... from the estate in an amount not to exceed \$17,000." 5/14/57 School Board meeting: "The Superintendent announced that the Grabill property on New York Avenue..., for which the Board had been negotiating for use by the [MJC], had been sold to another party."

Here's how this institution, at their 6/11/57 meeting, responded to having the object of their desire snatched from their outreaching hand: "The Superintendent and Dean Deyo... briefed the Board on the action to date in connection with the proposed acquisition of a site adjacent to the College for future use. They stated that they felt this land is valuable to the school. In view of the fact **that neighbors have purchased the Grabill property during the period of negotiations between the Board and the owners, the Superintendent remarked that he felt condemnation proceedings should be recommended.**" [emphasis added]

The School Board voted to have condemnation investigated as a possible action. Miraculously, without any outside intervention at all, the College realized that it should not abuse the condemnation process, and the motion was rescinded on 1/27/58. This may have been the last time in the past 50 years that Montgomery College did the right thing without being forced to do so by others.

As to the issue of relationships between College leaders, professors and students, consider this: 5/10/78: "The faculty at [MC] has voted overwhelmingly to recommend to the college's board... against renewing the contract of college president William C. Strasser when it expires on June 30 of next year... Students, incensed over next year's calendar which crams exams into 3 days scheduled to run from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. are circulating a petition opposing Strasser... Of the 246 faculty members who responded [to a poll], 225 (91.5 %) were opposed to renewing the president's contract, 14 were for renewing... and 7 had no opinion. The poll also gave Strasser low ratings in several areas. On a scale of one (low) to 10 (high), the majority of faculty members against renewing Strasser's contract gave him 1.5 for leadership, 2.8 for administrative ability, 1.1 for communications and 1.8 for public relations. The poll... conducted in Feb. and sent confidentially to the board... also listed the 3 most important problems facing the college as apathy and morale, Dr. Strasser, and lack of communication...

"Several members of the [MC] Student Senate are distributing a petition asking the board... not to consider Strasser as a candidate... Several thousand students have already signed the petitions. The goal is 6000 signatures (about half of the Rockville campus enrollment) to be presented to the board... Previously [Strasser] had been censured by the faculty (1968), asked to resign (Dec., 1976) and hung in effigy by students (Nov., 1977)."

11/8/78: "The president of [MC], William C. Strasser, will step down when his current 5-year contract ends on 6/30/79... Strasser has been president... since 1966. He presided over a great expansion in the college's enrollment, offerings and the addition of a third campus--but will also be remembered for tremendous friction with the faculty and students... during his tenure... The friction at [MC], according to some faculty members,

led to the state legislature's unprecedented vote last spring to allow collective bargaining at MC, which is not authorized at any other community college in Md..."

Today, adjunct, untenured Montgomery College professors are paid \$880 per credit hour taught, normally as three credit hour courses. Full-time, tenured faculty can earn as much as \$3,038 per credit hour. It is also reported that adjunct professors do not have health benefits or defined benefit pensions. Montgomery College's uniquely bad behavior over the decades has caused a number of "unprecedented" votes and actions by other government entities. I hope that all who seek to hold the College to the same standards as all of us will find assistance in this and future installments of "The Real Montgomery College".