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The Hellie Years: A Look at the Legacy of Linfield's 19th President

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The Hellie years

A look at the legacy of Linfield's 19th president

Richard Ekman was only eight years out of graduate school, a tenured history professor and dean at Hiram College, when the curriculum vitae for Thomas L. Hellie came across his desk in 1980. Ekman, who admits to being “very young” as an administrator in those days, followed a hunch and made a decision he still calls one of his best. Hellie, who hadn’t yet finished his Ph.D. dissertation

at University of Missouri, became Hiram’s new assistant professor of theatre.

“He brought that program to life,” says Ekman, now president at the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). “There were enormous numbers of students interested, the productions were ambitious and high quality and Tom quickly became an influential member of the faculty.”

Ekman eventually left for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Hellie for the Associated Colleges of the Midwest. But the two never lost touch. Decades later, they were given an opportunity to work closely together again after Hellie was hired in 2006 as Linfield College president. Ekman by that time was leading the CIC, which includes Linfield as a member.

Hellie, who joined the CIC board and eventually became chair of the national organization, struck Ekman as remarkably unchanged from the young theatre professor he had hired in 1980.

“He is a person of great integrity, very open, even to talking about ideas that make people uncomfortable,” Ekman says.



“Thanks to Tom’s leadership, we are leaders among our peers when it comes to diversity of our students.”

– Gerardo Ochoa, assistant dean for diversity and community partnerships

“He can bring resolution to difficult issues in ways that allow everyone to feel as though they participated, and he understands group dynamics of small communities very well.

“All those things were evident when he started out. He’s very much the same person.”

Every college president starts with a list of priorities they’d like to accomplish in the limited time they have available. (The average tenure of a president is seven years, though Hellie has served almost twice as long.) Some imagine being “hard hat presidents,” overseeing the construction of new buildings. Some hope to be fundraisers, changing the fortunes of a university through philanthropy. Others want to be innovators, introducing new programs.

Whatever Hellie imagined for his time at Linfield, he could not have foreseen the start of the worst economic depression since the 1930s or the symbolic tragedy of the Old Oak crashing to the ground – both of which happened early in his administration.

The crises, and managing through years of economic depression, could easily have come to define the Hellie era. “Those few years, when all that was going on, were really tough and a little scary for everyone,” Hellie says now.

But the son of Minnesota farmers who had spent most of his life working to promote the life-changing power of independent colleges had strong convictions about the mark he wanted to leave.

As Hellie enters the final months of what he calls “the most important and fulfilling experience of my professional life,” those deep convictions have come to define his era more than responses to specific challenges.

At the top of his priority list was increasing Linfield’s accessibility and diversity. By almost any measure, Linfield is a very different place on that front than it was a dozen years ago.

On the McMinnville campus since the 2006-07 academic year, U.S. students of color have increased from 12 to 35 percent and first-generation students have jumped from 12 to 25 percent. At the School of Nursing, U.S. students of color have increased

from 13 to 33 percent. First-generation students, meanwhile, weren’t tracked on the Portland campus until the 2008-09 year, at 4 percent – a figure that has since leaped to 26 percent.

That shift wasn’t happenstance. Hellie pushed admissions, student affairs and communications to reflect a more diverse college, he founded the president’s Diversity Advisory Council and created a new position, the Assistant Dean for Diversity and Community Partnerships. He also urged the college’s Board of Trustees to recruit new members to reflect the diversity it was seeking in its student body.

“Thanks to Tom’s leadership, we are leaders among our peers when it comes to diversity of our students,” says Gerardo Ochoa, the first to hold the Assistant Dean for Diversity and Community Partnerships title.

Another point of emphasis for Hellie was hiring and developing strong faculty. During his tenure, Linfield endowed new faculty positions in economics, creative writing, sociology, Shakespeare studies, political science and wine studies. It also established new funds for faculty development and faculty excellence.

“Tom’s commitment to faculty development goes deep in ways most people might not immediately understand,” says Barbara Seidman, chair of the English Department and a Linfield faculty member since 1983. Seidman, also retiring this year, served as interim dean of faculty and a vice president during the first two years of Hellie’s presidential term. She said the endowed chair positions, the new faculty awards and other, less-visible steps over the past 12 years, “have had a meaningful impact on programs and curricular development” in departments across the college.

“I am proud of the fact that the quality and quantity of scholarship and research have grown,” Hellie says. “We have pushed hard to hire young faculty who are extremely talented in the classroom, and also gifted scholars.”

Perhaps the change the Hellie years will be most remembered for, however, is the development of wine education.

Linfield's affiliation with American Baptist Churches USA meant that alcohol was frowned upon for much of its history – the college's first name, in 1858, was the Baptist College at McMinnville. By the time Hellie assumed the presidency in 2006, the Baptist influence was not nearly so prevalent. That shift, and the college's location in the heart of Oregon wine country, provided an opportunity for Linfield to make a name for itself in wine education.

Unlike pre-professional programs focused on grape growing or winemaking, Linfield would offer the first liberal arts-based degree built around the other skills necessary to run successful wine businesses – everything from production to geography, marketing, hospitality and distribution.

“Tom envisioned a program that would align with Linfield's core mission and amplify its relationship with the wine industry to develop a curriculum that's unique in the United States, if not the world,” says Ellen Brittan, co-owner at Brittan Vineyards and Linfield's Director of Wine Education from 2014 to 2017. “He recognized that the wine industry needs more than just winemakers.”

Linfield has been home to the Oregon Wine History Archive since 2011. The college debuted an interdisciplinary wine studies minor in fall 2016, and will start a standalone major in fall 2018. Linfield also created online certificates in wine marketing and wine

management, hired internationally known wine climatologist Greg Jones in 2017 and this spring received a \$6 million gift from Domaine Serene Winery founders Grace and Ken Evenstad to expand and grow wine education.

“Years from now, people will look back and say, ‘this all goes back to Tom Hellie and his vision for seizing this opportunity,’” says David Haugeberg, chair of the Linfield Board of Trustees from 2009 to 2017.

Another key opportunity the college seized upon during the Hellie years was the renovation of major buildings. Linfield had to shelve plans for a comprehensive capital campaign after the Great Recession dried up financing, but Hellie worked with the Board of Trustees and pushed to remake the old Northup Hall library building. In 2011, Northup reopened as T.J. Day Hall (named to honor a donor and longtime trustee) after an \$8.2 million renovation – housing the business, English, economics and philosophy departments and the Linfield Center for the Northwest, and increasing classroom space on the McMinnville campus by 25 percent.

“Tom turned a negative into a positive,” says Dan Preston '83, vice president for enrollment management. “Construction costs were lower in the middle of the recession, so we didn't have



Tom, Julie and Edgar

Tom Hellie and Julie Olds walk Edgar, their 10-year-old Labrador, during a recent evening on campus. Throughout her years in McMinnville, Olds has maintained a management career with organizations and facilities that serve senior citizens across a wide swath of Oregon. Unlike her husband, Olds says she has no intention of retiring this year. She will, however, miss the cultural opportunities and dog-walking options available at Linfield.

“I am proud of the fact that the quality and quantity of scholarship and research have grown. We have pushed hard to hire young faculty who are extremely talented in the classroom, and also gifted scholars.”

– *Thomas L. Hellie*

to raise as much money. Instead of believing that any fundraising efforts were shot, he was determined to do something positive as quickly as possible.”

In the years that followed, Linfield also completed major renovations to Dillin, Melrose, Riley, Taylor and Walker halls.

“Tom was able to pick up the pieces in a really bad time economically, secure funding, take advantage of a drop in interest rates and get T.J. Day done,” says Seidman. “The stair-step renovations of academic buildings continued, and that has been hugely important to the college.”

Haugeberg calls Hellie “extraordinarily wise” in how he approached all of his priorities, and how he worked with constituencies (students, parents, faculty, alumni, donors) that have different ideas about how to lead a college. One of the ways he did that was to work with Haugeberg to refashion the Board of Trustees, recruiting more diverse members and new members with specific skillsets while turning it into a committee-oriented working board.

“Tom understood and appreciated how important an effective board could be,” Haugeberg says. “He worked extensively to develop a board. That, in and of itself, has been a real success of his presidency.”

Hellie also served on boards for CIC and other higher education organizations – guided by a core belief that independent colleges are better at some things than other types of universities. He was and is convinced that the personal attention, faculty mentoring and small classes help students who fall through the cracks in other settings find a way to succeed.

Sarah Flanagan, vice president in charge of government relations at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), calls Hellie “perhaps the best and most consistent president-lobbyist of the past two decades” for this sector of higher education. Hellie has said he will wait until after July 1 to decide on future commitments, but Flanagan says she will be

encouraging him to remain active on boards and foundations in the years ahead.

“President Hellie has worked tirelessly to build relationships with the Senators and members of Congress from the Oregon delegation, and mentored their staffs on the needs of college families,” Flanagan says. “He is considered by NAICU to be among its strongest voices on Capitol Hill on behalf of students.”

Judith Block McLaughlin, educational chair at the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents, says looking back and evaluating a president’s administration is a tricky thing.

“For all colleges, these are incredibly competitive times,” McLaughlin says. “But overall, you have to look at an institution’s health like you would a person’s health. Someone may have slightly elevated blood pressure, but they don’t have other issues. Maybe they could lose a few pounds, but they’re still wonderfully healthy. An institution has to be viewed in its totality, like a person.”

The Hellie years at Linfield, says Dave Baca ’78, the current board chair, have been incredibly healthy.

“Choosing the right president is the most important thing a board does, and not an easy task,” Baca says. “Each president must contend with different challenges, as the college and the environment change over time. Tom has successfully led us through some of the most difficult times in recent memory.”

Looking back on the last dozen years, Hellie says he is profoundly grateful – to faculty members, trustees and staff, to alumni, friends and donors, to his predecessors.

“But,” he says, “I am especially grateful to our students for their ambition, enthusiasm, idealism and hope. Our students have motivated and inspired me, so to them I owe the most. It has been a great honor to serve as the president of Linfield College.”

– *Scott Bernard Nelson ’94*





2006-2018

The timeline

Tom Hellie's tenure at Linfield College

