

Joseph C. Blumel (1928-2007)

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In the spring of 1974, Portland State University (PSU) inaugurated its fifth president, Joseph Carolton Blumel. The school had just turned twenty-eight years old, having been established in 1946 as an extension center that reported directly to the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. As a university, it was only five years old.

Inaugurations of university presidents are full of pomp, ceremonies, speeches, and colorful regalia, but Joe Blumel's inaugural was dominated by activities designed to explore the ways the university could reach out to the community. The result was the Vital Partners Declaration endorsed by the university leadership and leaders of Multnomah County and the City of Portland. The declaration, while not intended as such, laid down the foundation for PSU to become a nationally recognized urban university.

Born on March 3, 1928, in Kansas City, Missouri, Blumel graduated from the University of Nebraska with a bachelor of science degree in 1950. After serving honorably in the U.S. Army in Korea, he returned to the University of Nebraska where he obtained a master of arts in economics in 1956. While serving as a faculty member at what was then Portland State College, he obtained his Ph.D. in economics in 1965 from the University of Oregon.

At PSU, Blumel was a faculty member, a dean, a vice president for academic affairs, and the university's longest serving president. As vice president and president, he guided the institution through its transition from college to university. Under his leadership, the university offered its first doctoral programs and significantly expanded its professional and academic master degrees. He was also instrumental in fostering the academic and outreach programs that enhanced the diversity of the faculty and student body.

As president, Blumel took the helm of the university when higher education in Oregon faced financial hard times. The challenge that often faced him was how to balance mandated budget cuts with the aspirations of a university that had yet to attain maturity and meet the expectations of the community. During his twelve-year tenure, the university suffered numerous budget cuts, but it also established four professional schools (one of which disappeared in the budget cuts of the early 1990s). Today, the College of Urban and Public Affairs, the College of Engineering, and the School of Fine and Performing Arts owe their existence to Dr. Blumel. He also reorganized the divisions of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences into the larger College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Blumel led the expansion of the campus and oversaw the construction and acquisition of several academic and student housing projects. One of them, Blumel Hall, was named after him in 2008.

While focusing on ties to the local community, Blumel did not ignore international connections. He maintained a longtime connection with Japan's Hokkaido University in Sapporo and also established ties with China's Zhengzhou University and Daegu University in Korea.

Blumel was involved with numerous civic, professional, and charitable organizations. He was a member and chair of the Commission on Colleges of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges and chair of the Governor's Council of Economic Advisors. He was a member of the board of directors of First Interstate Bank, Kaiser Permanente, and a founding member of Oregon Health Sciences University Advisory Board. His community service covered a diverse list of organizations that included the Oregon Symphony, Portland Art Museum, Oregon Public Broadcasting, Portland Opera, Portland Youth Philharmonic, Portland Chamber of Commerce, Loaves and Fishes, and Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Fund.

Blumel retired from PSU in the fall of 1986 after planting the seeds for another in the long list of academic programs that he championed—architectural education, which after many years is today a reality at PSU. His academic service did not end with his retirement. For several months in 1989, he agreed to serve as interim president of Lewis & Clark College and was a positive force during a period of transition there.

Joe Blumel died in Portland on April 2, 2007, leaving behind his wife of forty-six years, Priscilla Bryant Blumel, and two daughters.

Sources

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