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Maricopa County Junior College District celebrates 50 years



Glendale Community [College students](#) in 1969.

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By Mary Beth Faller

The Republic | azcentral.com

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Fifty years ago this month, the voters of Maricopa County launched the country's largest community-college system.

At the time, it included only Phoenix College, which had shed the "junior" in its name as it educated scores of returning World War II veterans in the late 1940s. Over the decades, the Maricopa County Junior College District expanded into 10 colleges with more than two dozen satellite campuses.

Natalie Vaughn, director of online marketing and social media for the district, has been digging through archives — both digital and dusty — and has found many interesting stories.

"It's moving to hear people in their own words tell us we've helped them get a better job to provide for their children or get that certification to make more money in their field of expertise," Vaughn said.

There's no signature event to celebrate the anniversary, but the district has put up a website and Facebook page with photos and video clips of students, staff and faculty, both current and from years ago.

"It's gotten people really engaged, and it's hilarious to see the comments," she said.

Tom Gariepy, director of communications for the district, said the marketing department is in the process of organizing the old materials.

"I'm an artifact fan. I think it should be digitized eventually but I think there is nothing like seeing some of those 1960s brochures, where everything from the logos to the typefaces are so '60s," he said.

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Remaining Views



Explosive growth

Vaughn found that editing the oral histories was difficult because there are so many interesting stories.

One is from Marshall Trimble, the state historian and a history teacher at Scottsdale Community College, who describes himself as a reluctant student at Phoenix College in the fall of 1956.

"I was a small-town boy who moved to the city," he said. "One time, I quit going to class because I was pretty immature, and my instructor said, 'If you don't miss a single day the rest of the semester, I'll give you a C.' I kept my end of the bargain, and figured if I went to one class, I might as well go to the others, too.

"Phoenix College gave me my boost, and I've always been grateful."

Many of the faculty and staff describe the chaotic beginnings of the colleges, when they were "extensions," renting space in schools, department store basements, offices and churches and passing out textbooks from the trunks of their [cars](#).

"People's ability to innovate under really pioneering circumstances was amazing," Gariepy said.

A change in mission

That explosive growth brought a lot of tension as the system transformed its mission, according to Richard Felnagle, an English professor at Mesa Community College and the author of "Maricopa's [Community Colleges](#): The Turbulent Evolution of an Education Giant."

His book, published in 2000, notes a lot of unrest among administration, faculty, the governing board and students, especially during the 1970s.

"There was a certain elitism that Phoenix College had been this little Stanford in the desert, and if we were going to create a community-college system, what they wanted to do was clone Phoenix College," Felnagle said.

"But then they decided to go with more workforce training and other programs that were not part of the traditional junior-college model, so a lot of that was moved into another college — Maricopa Tech, which started in an old

department store and eventually evolved into GateWay."

Felnagle's book describes how the 1972 student orientation at Maricopa Tech was held in an X-rated theater in downtown Phoenix, and later, a photograph of the event was altered to remove the name of the movie from the marquis.

"That was the practical nature of the guys who were doing it, and that was their idealism. What counted was the mission — taking the classes to the people," Felnagle said.

The 1970s saw picketing by faculty and unrest among students.

As the 1980s came, the colleges moved toward business partnerships and workforce training. A quarter of the 250,000 students who take classes in the system every year are in an occupational program.

Felnagle sees the future of the community-college district still tied to the county.

"If the county sees a lot of growth and expansion, the community colleges will be a source of that," he said.

See the district's 50th-anniversary site at celebrate.maricopa.edu.



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