

**The History of Des Moines Area Community College  
Higher Education Association (DMACCHEA)**

Submitted By Dave Palmer

The history of the faculty union is a long and complicated story that involves many individuals and various issues. Many of the major players are no longer with us, so I have crafted a purely personal statement that provides only one perspective. It would be useful to gain other viewpoints to compile a truly historical record. However, I will share what I believe happened in those early days of building what we initially called the "faculty association."

I started at DMACC in the fall of 1970 as a history instructor. I had previously taught at Grinnell College, Iowa Lakes Community College (ILCC) Estherville and Saint John High School in eastern Canada. I had also been active in Democratic politics for over a decade and was thoroughly imbued with the idealism and the energy of the last great reform era of U.S. History. At ILCC I had served as an officer of the local faculty association, where amazingly, they were conducting collective bargaining without a state law, and I became an enthusiast for faculty unionism. Unlike ILCC, DMACC was newly formed, although the addition of the Boone Campus in 1969 added a remnant of the old junior college experience that was prevalent at ILCC Estherville. As an organizational problem, I could see that DMACC was a very fluid environment and the main impetus for the Ankeny Campus was the vocational-technical programs. ILCC at Estherville was overwhelmingly arts and sciences in orientation and the vocational-technical programs were largely located at a new site in Emmetsburg. ILCC had a deep friction between arts and sciences and vocational-technical programs, and this gave me concern as I considered how to bridge, what seemed to be, fairly hostile worlds when I arrived at the DMACC Ankeny Campus.

When arts and sciences really got off the ground at the Ankeny Campus there was a small core of faculty who had taught the previous year, but aside from them, the rest of us had no ties to one another. What bonded us together was the exciting era of change that we were in and an "underdog attitude" based on a belief that the Board of Directors (Trustees) and administration did not hold us in high regard. When I went to the Boone Campus to get to know people I could see that the faculty there had many of the same feelings, and were not happy to have joined DMACC. Both the newly arrived arts and sciences instructors and their older Boone colleagues did not view the college president and his subordinates with much favor; a plus for organizing. As an aside, the two Iowa community colleges that never organized had leaders that engendered a lot of respect and/or fear, and that was not true at DMACC. As I grew older, I came to understand that some of our feelings toward those in control were not always very fair. We were often oblivious to the challenges faced by the leaders who were trying to build a brand new system.

At the state and national level was a large surge of interest in public sector collective bargaining. There was no doubt this was the foundation for organizing unions across the nation. From the 1960's into the 1970's, there was a simultaneous push at the local and state level, in which I played a dual role: 1) locally, I was part of a determined crew of folks trying to build an organization created to carry out collective bargaining to obtain a contract with the Board and administration and 2) at the state level, I was part of a smaller group that created the "Iowa Higher Education Association" (IHEA), an arm of the Iowa State Education Association (ISEA). I had the advantage of previously bargaining at ILCC Estherville, being engaged in organizing partisan politics at the state level and residing in the seat of state government. One specific event that aided my/our cause was the election of Dr. Richard Byerly to the Iowa House of Representatives in 1972. Rich was a young, energetic DMACC administrator who as a legislator took upon the cause of collective bargaining for teachers, although an unpopular position

amongst his peers. Soon Dr. Joseph “Joe” Borgen arrived from Illinois where he held a position as Vice President for Instruction and had considerable experience with collective bargaining. President Paul Lowery and the College Board of Directors opposed the move to unionize the faculty and the activist instructors largely took this to be a desire to not share power and a fear of dramatically raising the cost of instruction. For me, this seemed to be a logical position based upon vested interests, so I never saw the “antis” as personal adversaries. In any case, there were two related processes in the early 1970’s where lobbying was building for a new public sector bargaining law at the state level, and local organizing tried to round up votes to hold an election one the law and rules were in place.

The passage of the Public Employees Relations Act (PERA) in 1974 created the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB); much like the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 that built the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for private sector workers. DMACC was one of many public institutions that tried to unionize under the new Iowa law. The election at DMACC was complicated by the existence of an American Federation of Teachers (AFT) local, at what was called the Skill Center located on Bell Avenue. I recall that federal dollars were involved with this center, which appeared to have small connection to the Ankeny Campus operation. In any case, the small band of hard-core unionists was overwhelmed in the election that certified DMACCHEA. It should be noted that there was some controversy amongst the Ankeny faculty about inclusion of non-teaching professionals but ultimately the decision was made to include them in the bargaining unit.

By 1974 we had built the necessary consciousness within the Ankeny Campus faculty to generate some support for collective bargaining. An issue had arose out of the 1960’s reforms that played into this process – equal pay for women. At ILCC the Association had negotiated a true indexed salary schedule but DMACC had a pay system based on labor market conditions in the private sector. In essence this carried pay discrimination from the private sector into the college, making an easy target for folks, like me, trying to round up support for collective bargaining. Women in the health sciences and business areas joined the cause. While we never did much scientific analysis of votes, this had to have been a key component of the vote call and the subsequent victory by the ISEA affiliate, DMACCHEA.

The actual process of bargaining our first contract was not an easy matter for either side. The harmony of interests largely revolved around salaries for instructors, but there were other elements where our group had little or no experience. I was the negotiator and recall Tom Beck was the president of the local. We divided the actual writing into committees. Our association and bargaining team received little guidance from ISEA. We had an ISEA “boiler plate” to work from. We resolved our internal differences and brought a proposal to the table. In my view, the reason that we received a fairly good contract and an outstanding salary system was the work of the administrative/Board negotiator, Dr. Joe Borgen. He had been through this process previously and saw to it we received a fair agreement. Since I worked at the state level during this same time period, I can say that most of Joe’s peers at the other colleges showed no such concern or care, and some very one-sided contracts were agreed upon. The faculty at DMACC received the only indexed salary schedule at Iowa’s community colleges that equated arts and sciences experience with vocational-technical experience. And, while it has been modified, it is still in place 37 years later. Another important aspect regarding salary was summer pay for nine month faculty. Again, DMACC became the only college to provide pro-rata pay. (Note: At a very personal level this was a huge matter for me and others who tried to live from a single income.) Grievance arbitration was another key goal for faculty, and also turned out favorably.

At the administrative level, Dr. Borgen encountered problems with President Lowery who felt that he could modify the contract after a “temporary agreement” (TA) had been reached. This was resolved by asking a prominent labor lawyer from Des Moines to review the contract; the response was that it was a

good contract. If one stands back from the story, it was clearly far more difficult for management to strike a fair bargain because they had to give up some control. It is a testament to the administration that after the original conflicts, there has been little serious internal dispute in almost four decades. I felt at that time, and continue to feel, that what saved us from some of the bruising conflicts witnessed at other colleges was a group of younger DMACC administrators who were enlightened in the realm of employee relations. These were often front line managers who interfaced directly with faculty, and in my case, Dr. Rus Slicker ran a good operation. My chief vocational-technical counterpart, the late Clair Fisher, had the same feelings about his immediate administrators, the late Dr. Bob Eicher and his assistant, Carroll Bennett. Thus, once the election was won and we had to implement the agreement, both sides went forward in good faith. At the state level I saw instances where management tried to sabotage contracts, but this never happened at DMACC. A labor-management process evolved where by a good deal of shared decision making came into being. If the state had provided steady funding for the community college system at the time, the internal conflicts of the late 1970's and early 1980's would not have happened.

We are now approaching the four decade anniversary of the organizing of the faculty association/union and the advent of collective bargaining. Certainly we live in far different times from those heady days of the 1960's and 1970's where optimism was still so strong that it overcame the bitter struggles over Vietnam and civil rights. Public sector employees made huge strides thanks to collective bargaining, while current political forces from the right attempt to undo the gains. The context of our "great recession" and the dramatic structural changes in our economy that have threatened the middle class are an important context, as is the sea of conservative money coming from corporations and their wealthy owners. Divisive social issues were just emerging forty years ago and now they provide wonderful grist for the mill of those who would destroy unions. Fortunately, Iowa is relatively moderate compared to states like Wisconsin, Indiana and Ohio and current conservative leadership seems content to trim wages, pensions, health care and other benefits rather than wage a full-scale war against collective bargaining. A contract has recently been settled at DMACC (2012) and fits a generally harmonious record in both negotiations and grievances. There have been community college districts that have had eras of conflict, but looking at the state history of public sector of collective bargaining, the scene has largely been tranquil. History is not prophecy so one can't safely predict if this will continue.

Lastly, one of the charges of this Pioneer History project is to cite the names of those who made contributions, a difficult and risky task. As was noted at the beginning of this paper, we had "many cooks in the kitchen." When I get nostalgic, as I often do in my declining years, I flashback to my days in the faculty at Estherville (ILCC) and on the DMACC Ankeny Campus. The simple fact of being young is one reason, but those of us who started our careers in the early days of the forming community college recall the genuine sense of mission that many of us possessed. In my case, due to my political beliefs, I was a zealot of building power for the faculty who were charged with developing new courses and programs. I saw negotiations as leverage for broader power within the colleges, and I confess that I possessed skepticism about the applicability of industrial unionism to higher education. At ILCC an autocratic dean was a perfect foil for the industrial union model, but no such circumstances existed at DMACC. Indeed, I remain convinced that if the president and Board chairman of DMACC had been more skillful, the college would have joined Indian Hills Community College and North Iowa Area Community College as community colleges that did not join in the collective bargaining process.