

College honors its 'carpenter' at banquet

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Wilson W. Sorensen has been blessed with a craftsman's touch. It's his nature to eye the greatest potential in even the coarsest materials and weakest designs.

And for 37 years, Sorensen, a carpenter, applied his deft artisan's skill to build a solid foundation for a then-fledgling trade school funded mostly by the federal government to train blue-collar workers. From 1946 to 1983, the Draper native stretched limited budgets, recruited talented tradesmen, adapted to the political world of higher education and oversaw the seedling years of Utah Valley State College, the former trade school that is now the state's fastest growing public college.

"I never contemplated being president of the school, but at the time, people with both an education background and trade background were not plentiful," said Sorensen, a soft-spoken man who extends a firm grip with calloused hands. "It's pretty hard to get a president as involved in trades as I was. I grew up with it."

Sorensen, 82, was lauded Friday with a Lifetime Achievement Award for his three decades of service to job training and education at the college. The honor was given during UVSC's first alumni recognition banquet as a part of Homecoming week, which ends Saturday.

"This college is where it is today because of the dramatic leadership President Sorensen provided," said Douglas E. Warner, executive director of budgets and management at UVSC.

"During his years as leader of this college he provided tremendous foresight and vision of what this college could become."

The Central Utah Vocational School was founded in 1941 to bolster the United States' role in World War II. Skilled workers were needed to supply arms and ammunition to the allies.

Wilson, who taught industrial arts classes at Granite High School after graduating from Brigham Young University, was hired to buy equipment and tools for the training courses.

Five years later, at 29 years of age, dapper in a suit and bow tie, he was tapped as director of the school. He hesitantly began his watch over the classes, held at 1101 S. University Ave., the former Utah County Fairgrounds and present-day East Bay Business Park.

"I made a lot of mistakes," he says, chuckling. "I'm lucky the teachers and staff put up with me."

The early years were lean and challenging. Small budgets, growing enrollment and a vague identity and mission were difficult obstacles to overcome, he said.

After the war ended, 90 percent of the school's budget was lost with the cancellation of the war production training funds. The 1943 Legislature refused to fund the school. Cutbacks forced the job-training school to offer only a handful of classes until lawmakers gave \$50,000 for operating costs in 1945. Two years later the college became a state-funded institution.

UVSC's current fight for funding is déjà vu for Sorensen. The allocation was strongly opposed by Dixie College, Utah State, Weber College and the University of Utah.

"We had opposition from all of them. They all felt another school would deplete the funding," he explains, sitting in a small office tucked away in an unused workshop at the Mountainland Applied Technology Center in Provo. "That's been the history. We've

always had to battle against the universities."

Sorensen headed the administration of the college - which had grown to 2,000 students by 1971 - through two campus moves and two state-sanctioned names. In 1953, the name was changed to Utah Trade Technical Institute, only to be altered 14 years later to Utah Technical College at Provo.

In later years, the school moved to the Orem campus and the name tweaked again twice until settling with the current name to reflect the mission of the school.

"The feeling back then was that if students couldn't succeed in English and math then they should be sent to the vocational school," he said. "Then the students here started earning twice as much after they graduated."

After his retirement 16 years ago, Sorensen stayed busy. He wrote a 430-page book about the history of the college, has served as chairman of the Freedom Festival and 1980's Committee to Save Geneva Steel and as a board member of Orem Community Hospital. He also ran for a seat in the 1984 Legislature.

Sorensen has watched UVSC grow with pride and trepidation. He never expected enrollment to hit 14,000 or so many buildings to stand on the 185-acre campus.

He is concerned, however, that liberal education is overtaking a vocational training focus.

"I'm a little worried about the emphasis on the liberal arts," he said, adding that some four-year degrees now offered at the school do have trade applications. "I think the college can maintain its good reputation for training people for jobs to still have the main thrust for job preparation."

"The best education you can get is to first get job preparation. Then, after learning how to make a living, take classes that will enrich you," he said. "I think that is the key to a happy life."