

**Change and Innovation: The Presidency of**

**Dr. Albert W. Brown**

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## **Abstract**

Dr. Albert Brown served as SUNY Brockport’s President from 1965 until 1981. His initial duty was to raise the College up from a small, quiet school into one of the most prestigious institutions in the state. For the first ten years of his tenure, he did just that, eventually making SUNY Brockport the second largest institution in SUNY. Unfortunately, like most good things, the esteem Brown had built for Brockport would slowly come to an end, falling out of Brown’s control.

When Brown arrived on SUNY Brockport's campus, the student population was approximately 3,000 students. Through several different ways Brown helped increase those numbers to almost 12,000 by the 1974-75 academic year. One tactic he used was to aggressively recruit transfer students. At the time, community college graduates had few options available to them in terms of 4-year colleges. Brown realized this, and actively recruited them. Also, Brown led SUNY Brockport into urban Rochester, and actively recruited minority and economically disadvantaged students to the campus. In addition to students, Brown also brought in many new faculty and drastically increased the size of the campus, expanding to the southwest.

Brown also moved to change the curriculum. He re-organized the departments, re-organized the administration, and changed the atmosphere in which the students would learn. Brown also raised the admission requirements each year, until he felt the school was admitting "good" students. In addition, he helped organize the famous Peace Corps Program.

Tragically, after 1975, a series of problems plagued both SUNY Brockport and New York State, and would bring Brockport to its knees. Ineffective leadership, both in administrations and for the state, a financial crisis at the state level, and decreasing numbers of applicants to the college, among others, help to combine and destroy the success Brockport had enjoyed the ten years prior to 1975. All of this would culminate with Brown's retirement in 1981.

## **I. Dr. Brown, Welcome to SUNY Brockport**

In 1965 SUNY Brockport received a jolt that would change it from a small, sleepy teachers college to one of the more prestigious institutions in the state. Delivering that jolt was Dr. Albert Brown. A native of New York and a University of Syracuse graduate, Brown was employed to mold Brockport into a liberal arts college and raise the prestige of the school. In less than 10 years he would help raise the number of enrolled students by almost 9,000! He would also re-organize the academic structure, hire new faculty, and expand the size of the campus. Those students graduating in 1965 would return as alumni to a vastly different campus and learning atmosphere. “The model for Brockport, is Brockport” Brown would say, and would shape the College as he saw fit. He would also guide Brockport into new arenas, taking up programs in urban Rochester, which was vacated by two other institutions. Brown was a man of innovation, and truly left a mark on the college he served for over fifteen years.

During the time that Dr. Brown served as President, he targeted several areas. The first was the students entering the school. He looked to increase the overall amount of students, along with bringing in better educated students. Second was to change the academic structure. Faculties and departments were created, and programs were added to increase the opportunities for students to further their intellect. Along with this went the growth in size of the faculty and campus. Third is Brown’s attraction to minority students, especially those in urban Rochester. Fourth, the Peace Corps was one unique program developed by Brown to educate and prepare those students intending to volunteer in the Peace Corps after college. Then, the final area is not one targeted by

Brown, but one that targeted him. Between 1974 and 1976 something happens. The quality of students begins to decline, along with numbers, funding is slowly cut down, and there are changes in the administration for the state. These, among other problems, trap Brockport in a whirlpool that is continually spiraling downward, and would culminate in Brown's retirement in 1981.

In 1965 Samuel Gould, chancellor of the State University of New York system, remarked, "This is the worst institution I've ever seen," in reference to SUNY Brockport.<sup>1</sup> Brown would use this to his advantage, making the changes he felt necessary to raise SUNY Brockport from this "worst institution" status given by Gould. And the faculty would have to follow Brown if they wanted to shed this title.

## **II. Explosion in Size**

During Brown's first year at the helm, the number of students at SUNY Brockport was just under 3,000. That would change very quickly. Brown's first move was to recruit transfer students. Up until that time, four-year colleges and universities primarily rejected community college graduates because they were seen as lacking the intelligence of those students that had been in their institution from the beginning. There was also an issue with funding, in which private schools were given aid based on the number of students they graduated that had been at the school for 4 years, not just the total number of graduates. Therefore, there was no incentive for private schools to accept those students wishing to transfer from community colleges. Brown held other ideas though.

Transfer students would bring two positive aspects to the school, if recruited. First, they would immediately increase the number of students in upper division classes. The state had recently created a new formula where funding would be dispersed based on

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Albert Brown, being interviewed by M. Fausold, 13 February 1989.

the level of instruction, giving more support for upper-division enrollments than lower.<sup>2</sup> So if Brockport recruited transfers to swell the ranks of the upper division classes, it could receive more funding. The second positive attached to transfer students was their plentiful number, and their numbers would increase in size in the upcoming years.<sup>3</sup>

Not only was the size of the student body increased, but the number of faculty was expanded as well. There was an emphasis on education in the hiring process, as more and more professors were being hired with PhD's. In the hiring process, many senior faculty members were brought in. They would serve a dual purpose. First, these senior faculty members would attract young and ambitious professors to the college. In addition to attracting them, these senior faculty members would, second, teach these younger faculty members. More than 130 new faculty and staff were brought in during 1970 alone.<sup>4</sup> Now the college would have the faculty to teach the increasing numbers of students being enrolled.

The physical size of the campus should also be noted at this point. Up until Brown was hired, the school had selectively bought existing houses to create room for expansion. To the southwest of campus was a vast open area of land of which would be ideal for the college. The story is that Dr. Brown took James Frost, Gould's predecessor, up in a plane to survey the land that Brown was trying to get approval to purchase. After several circles around the area at a significant altitude, Frost caved and gave permission to purchase the land, with the intent of getting out of that plane as soon as possible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> B. Leslie and K. O'Brien, "The early Brown years: The decision to grow," Statements II, 19 March 2001, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Albert Brown, being interviewed by M. Fausold, 13 February 1989.

Thus, Brockport was able to expand to where the library, Tuttle North and South, the Administration Building, and various athletic fields and parking lots now sit.

### **III. Enrollment of Minority Students**

The other source of students that was seemingly untapped by other institutions were those minorities of urban Rochester. Brown had experience with the economically disadvantaged, for his prior employment was with the Economic Opportunity Office in Michigan,<sup>6</sup> and he felt that Brockport's function in SUNY should be in urban Rochester.<sup>7</sup> There were two forces at work here. First, the Rochester Institute of Technology and Monroe Community College both moved their campuses away from downtown Rochester. RIT left its downtown campus for a campus south of Rochester, and MCC moved its campus to a suburban campus on Henrietta Road, which at the time was not served by bus transportation.<sup>8</sup> Second, Brown felt that most of the SUNY schools were "agricultural accidents" (with the exception of Buffalo State College) and that, again, Brockport's duty was to be urban oriented.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, with both RIT and MCC leaving downtown Rochester, and Brown's feelings for the purpose of SUNY Brockport, it would only seem natural for Brockport to focus its attention on urban Rochester.

In the early 1960's, there were two centers of operation for disadvantaged students in downtown Rochester. The first was the Educational Opportunity Center, run by Erie Community College. Monroe Community College controlled the second, the

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<sup>6</sup> "SUCB Names Dr. Brown New President," *Stylus* (Brockport), 17 September 1965

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Brown, being interviewed by Dr. Kenneth O'Brien, 16 November 2000.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Urban Center. Both programs were brought under Brockport's control by 1970.<sup>10</sup> These two centers gave Brockport the thrust it needed to move into urban Rochester.

Brown felt that the college population should represent the population it served. At the time, the college population included about 6-7% minority students, while the overall population of the area was around 11% minority.<sup>11</sup> This provided one push for minority students. Also, before Affirmative Action, minority students were sometimes denied admission to college based on their race. This caused a backlog of very talented students with nowhere to go.<sup>12</sup> Coupled with Brown's desire to increase the enrollment of minorities, this backlog of talented students provided a great opportunity for Brown to both increase the college enrollment and raise the academic ability of those students enrolled.

In addition to running the Equal Opportunity Center and the Urban Center, the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) was established in 1968 at SUNY Brockport to help those disadvantaged students with their secondary education. "The primary objective of the EOP was to provide, in part, educationally related supportive services and supplemental financial assistance to those students whose educational and economic circumstances have limited their post-secondary educational opportunities."<sup>13</sup> Programs offered by the EOP were assistance in writing, reading, and other such skills required at the college level. In addition, they were assigned a counselor to whom they were required to see at least four times per semester. To aid their financial deficiencies, EOP students were given money for textbooks, spending money throughout the semester, and

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<sup>10</sup> B. Leslie and K. O'Brien, "The early Brown years: The decision to grow," Statements II, 19 March 2001, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Brown, being interviewed by Dr. Kenneth O'Brien, 16 November 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> SUNY-Special Programs 1985-86 annual report, 1.

other monies for financial assistance.<sup>14</sup> Also, entrance requirements were lowered for those students enrolled in the EOP program, so that by 1972, one did not even need a high school diploma to qualify for acceptance.<sup>15</sup>

#### **IV. Academic Change**

When Dr. Brown was brought into SUNY Brockport, he was not only going to increase the size of the student population, but he was going to change the nature of those enrolled. Beginning in 1966, the college instituted a plan to begin enrolling students that were more academically gifted as compared to those admitted prior to that year. The plan involved using the mid-point test scores of those admitted in 1965 as the minimum requirement for students entering in the fall of 1966.<sup>16</sup> This formula would again be used in the fall of 1967 using the mid-point acceptance of '66 as the minimum standard for '67. By 1968 the freshman and sophomore class were comparable to the level of "good" freshman being admitted around the country. This technique, combined with the admittance of quality transfer students, served to quickly raise the academic level of SUNY Brockport.

In addition to increasing the intelligence level of those students on campus, Brown also changed the structure to which they would learn. By the fall of 1966, the school was reorganized into six "faculties" that contained 14 departments, with another 9 to come in the next year.<sup>17</sup> Along with this move, by 1967, students would have to

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<sup>14</sup> Wilkenson, T., The Educational Opportunity Program at the State University of New York at Brockport 1968-2000, fall 2000, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Albert Brown, being interviewed by M. Fausold, 13 February 1989.

<sup>17</sup> B. Leslie and K. O'Brien, "The early Brown years: The decision to grow," Statements II, 19 March 2001, 19.

declare a major to be fulfilled by graduation.<sup>18</sup> This idea of an academic “major” was relatively new, but it was an idea that would soon become the norm in teacher education. Masters Programs were started, with the English Department offering the first. Other departments were rapidly adding MA programs as well. The 1968 Master Plan shows even the intent for an additional 32 master’s programs to be up and running within three years (although not all would be realized).<sup>19</sup> There was even talk of the addition of Doctorate programs. Although they would never come about, the mere thought of offering PHD programs illustrates both the positive growth of the school within the first 5 years of Brown’s tenure, and the expectations for the college in its near future.<sup>20</sup> By the time of his retirement, Brown would see the school grow to offering 38 undergraduate majors and 14 masters degree programs. By re-organizing the school’s academic offerings and changing the way students would approach their education, Brown revolutionized the learning process at SUNY Brockport.

Several unique programs surfaced during the Brown administration. The Nursing program, started in 1969, exists today.<sup>21</sup> There was also the incorporation of the Washington Semester Program in the late 60’s.<sup>22</sup> In this program, political science majors were able to earn college credit while also gaining valuable experience in our nations capital. Both programs, nursing and the Washington Semester, were designed to give students an alternate path of learning. Rather than read from a textbook or take notes during a lecture, they were forced to learn from their environment, whether at a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 20-21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Siembor, T., A Comparative Study of the Presidencies of Albert W. Brown of SUNY Brockport and James E. Perdue of SUNY Oswego, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Albert Brown, being interviewed by M. Fausold, 13 February 1989.

patient's bed, or in a politician's office. Tied in with this idea was the option of Independent Study, which was designed to promote more thorough study of material by a student, along with a better learning relationship between the professor and pupil.

## **V. The Peace Corps**

One innovative program run during Brown's tenure was the Peace Corps/College Degree Program. Started in 1967 after the fabled three Bloody Marys with Director Jack Vaughn, the Peace Corps program at SUNY Brockport was designed to take highly motivated college sophomores and prepare them for international service.<sup>23</sup> International education was something Brown felt necessary for people in the post-World War II generation, especially those graduating from a college institution. Brown also felt that if colleges could produce 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenants out of an ROTC program then they could produce graduates fully prepared to meet the demands of international service in the Peace Corps.<sup>24</sup>

The program consisted of several phases. The first phase lasted for twelve weeks during the summer and earned the student 15 credits toward their B.S. degree. This phase consisted of orientation, Spanish, cross-cultural study, psychological testing, and physical fitness. The second phase was during the fall and spring semesters, with students enrolling in a normal class load (15 credits per semester), while still studying Spanish and other cross-cultural lessons. A one-week visit to a potential host country was to be made during the semester break. The last phase was during the second summer, earning another 15 credits. By the end, the student had completed a teaching practicum in an area high school, a seminar in the history and culture of their host country, an oral language

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<sup>23</sup> Dr. Brown, being interviewed by Dr. Kenneth O'Brien, 16 November 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

exam. In addition, Peace Corps Selection Board examined them for approval. As graduates of the P.C. program, volunteers obtained B.S. degrees, provisional teaching licenses, and the language proficiency of an adult in the host country.<sup>25</sup>

The program was largely a success. Of the volunteers sent from Brockport's P.C. program, only one or two did not complete their two-year commitment. From other P.C. programs around the country entire groups of volunteers would back out of their commitment upon reaching their host country. Unfortunately, several things brought about the program's end. First, the Vietnam conflict ended. Many of the applicants in Brockport's P.C. program were looking for a draft deferment from the war in Vietnam, and the P.C. was one way to obtain that. Second, and most important, the Nixon Administration axed funding for the program in 1974.<sup>26</sup>

## **VI. The Fall**

In the 1975-76 academic year, SUNY Brockport's student population crested at 11,696 students. This number was a whopping 375% increase from the 2,747 students enrolled in the 1964-65 academic year.<sup>27</sup> The institution seemed headed for university status, and possibly the focal establishment of the SUNY system. Everything seemed in Brockport's favor. The leadership of SUNY, under Chancellor Gould until 1970, then James Frost, respected Brown, and helped him to accomplish the initiatives he set out to do. In addition, Nelson Rockefeller, Governor of New York since 1959, was also partial to Brown and SUNY Brockport.<sup>28</sup> With enrollment up and support from state leaders, it

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<sup>25</sup> Ballou, Origins of the Peace Corps/College Degree Program, 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The author cites Bruce Leslie, Ph.D.

<sup>28</sup> B. Leslie and K. O'Brien, "The Brown Years, Part II (1975-1981)," Statements II, 21.

would seem that nothing could go wrong. Unfortunately, within half the time it took to build Brockport to the point it was in 1975, things came crashing down.

Initial problems for the college would surface in enrollments. The number and quality of students putting in applications to SUNY Brockport was on the decline. There were several reasons for this. The major reason was the declining availability of transfer students from community colleges. This is not to say that there were fewer students graduating from community colleges, but that they were beginning to receive a warm welcome from both private institutions and other SUNY schools. The enactment of Bundy Aid made funds available to private colleges based on how many students they graduated, not on the former rule that aid be dispersed based on how many students graduated that had been there for all four years.<sup>29</sup> Other factors in the decline of enrollment were the end of the Vietnam War, for which students would head to college to avoid. Also, nationwide, there was a decline of high school graduates, something no college could avoid.<sup>30</sup>

The quality of students applying to SUNY Brockport also declined, for several reasons. One of the largest reasons seems to be that in 1965, '66, and '67 there had been a backlog of very talented students (transfers and minorities) looking for accepting colleges, and SUNY Brockport welcomed them with open arms. As with all good things, though, this rich pool of talent shrank, both in overall numbers, and because of gaining acceptance by other institutions.<sup>31</sup> Tied in with the overall decline of applying students, admissions would have to dig deeper into the applicant pool to meet projected numbers. Therefore, the combination of less available students, and lower quality students led to a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Albert Brown, being interviewed by M. Fausold, 13 February 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

decrease in standards for students entering the college. This was a reverse of the process used between 1965 and 1970 to build the academic quality of the student body.

In addition to problems at SUNY Brockport, there were changes occurring at the state level, which would have a negative impact on the school itself. Initially, there was the resignation of Gould, a long-time supporter of SUNY Brockport, from chancellor of SUNY. His replacement, Dr. James Frost, was also in favor of Brockport, but his successor, Ernest Boyer, did not hold Brockport to the same level as the preceding two.<sup>32</sup> Another shift in leadership was the departure of Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller from Governor of the state. His successor, Malcolm Wilson, would seek to spend public dollars carefully, meaning less financial aid for SUNY Brockport.<sup>33</sup> Also affecting the state, and the nation as well was a financial crisis. This was the time of the Oil Crisis, increased tensions with the U.S.S.R., and the Watergate Scandal, among others, and money was becoming harder to come by. Less money for the state equals less money for Brockport, which means less money for programs and prospective students. Adding to the financial hurt was the change of SUNY Brockport to “mature campus” status, meaning it was not projected to maintain growth. Therefore, it would mean even less money for Brockport.<sup>34</sup>

Another problem directly related to Brown was a series of poor upper-level administrators. During the late 60’s and early 70’s, Brown had a stable, competent group of people to work with, but by 1976, only one remained, Ralph Gennarino, and he retired in June of 1977.<sup>35</sup> As a cost saving measure, Brown re-organized the upper level

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<sup>32</sup> B. Leslie and K. O’Brien, “The Brown Years, Part II (1975-1981),” Statements II, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Dr. Albert Brown, being interviewed by M. Fausold, 13 February 1989.

<sup>35</sup> B. Leslie and K. O’Brien, “The Brown Years, Part II (1975-1981),” Statements II, 21.

administration into two vice presidents, two deans for upper and lower division and dean of human services, area coordinators, and numbers of department chairs. Rather than a clear level of leadership, this provided a scattered, unorganized array of administrators that only served to complicate the system, rather than make it better. In addition, the time for hiring faculty was at an end, and soon there was to be termination of teaching positions at the college.<sup>36</sup>

Coming in 1980 was a Report reviewing the Brown's Presidency, and it held many criticisms. They include too many decisions being made by Brown himself, failure of an internal communications system, and too large of an administration system for the size of the school. The report also suggested that since Brown was the man of growth for the late 60's and early 70's, people unfairly believed he could provide "miracles" to save the institution from its state in the later 70's. The high rate of turnover of top administrators, revisions to the administrative chart, and an unclear extent and limits of authority coming from Brown were also criticized in the report.<sup>37</sup>

## **VII. The End of an Era**

On October 1, 1980, fifteen years after he came to SUNY Brockport, Dr. Albert Brown handed in his request for resignation to the Board of Trustees.<sup>38</sup> He requested reassignment to a university professor, which is one of the highest ranking positions in the SUNY system and reserved for former SUNY presidents. The resignation became effective July 1981.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

<sup>37</sup> Report of the Committee to Review the Administration of President Albert W. Brown of the State University College at Brockport, March 19-21, 1980, 3-4.

<sup>38</sup> "Prez Brown Resigns After 15 Years of Good Service," Stylus, 22 October 1980.

Dr. Brown's legacy came in the growth of SUNY Brockport during the first 10 years of his administration. He broke new ground, and paved a new path for colleges to follow. He was one of the first to aggressively recruit transfer students, he dove into urban Rochester when other institutions were abandoning it, he established a revolutionary program with the Peace Corps, and played a major hand in making SUNY Brockport the college it is today. At the time of his resignation, he felt that the college was headed in a new direction, and it needed a new leader to guide the way. No one can deny that during the last five years of his presidency there were problems. Some were within his control, others out of his reach. Either way, however, it is clear that he had taken Brockport as far as he possibly could, and that his work was done. May Dr. Albert Brown forever be remembered as the President that took Brockport from being a small, insignificant teachers college to one of the largest institutions in the SUNY system.

## **Bibliographic Essay**

I took on this topic with the initial idea that since Dr. Brown was President during the “golden years” of Brockport, there would be considerable information on him. I expected there would be papers, letters, and articles, along with mountains of other information that would just fall into my lap. Unfortunately, I was wrong. Since the folder in the College Archives containing Brown’s material was quite thin, containing mostly pictures, I decided to begin my search with the *Stylus* articles dealing with Brown specifically, and they would end up leading me nowhere, wasting two to three weeks.

The gem of my research came when Dr. Leslie stumbled upon a narrative within the archives of Dr. Brown’s interview with Martin Fausold. This provided the jump-start I needed. The interview provided me with a wonderful insight to how Brown felt both about the College, and the SUNY system itself.

From there I focused my research on prior student papers, which were well done, I might add. The first was by Thomas Siembor, which compared the presidencies of Dr. Brown and James Perdue of SUNY Oswego. I also looked at Todd Wilkenson’s writings on the Equal Opportunity Program. A paper on the Peace Corps was also helpful.

Another very important source for my research was a 2-part article written by the History Department’s own Dr. Leslie and Dr. O’Brien on Dr. Brown’s presidency. The article provided a wonderful insight into the re-organization of the administration, the recruitment of transfers and faculty, SUNY and State leadership, and some of the problems that helped to bring Brockport down. The article was very helpful to my understanding of Brown’s administration of the College.

Finally, the interview with Dr. Brown done by Dr. O'Brien was a major assistance to my paper. They talked about the Peace Corps program, Brown's feelings on international education, athletics and the P.E. department, Brockport's connection with urban Rochester, the recruitment of minority students, and his feelings as to why things fell apart toward the end of his tenure.

Apparently there is a box or file of Brown's papers that Dr. O'Brien gave to the archives after his interview, but I was unable to recover it. To this day it remains a mystery, and may be able to provide valuable information to anyone writing more on the topic. One possible avenue for someone attempting to expand on this would be Brown's connection with the student population. One good that came from reading the *Stylus* articles was the view of Brown from the student perspective. There is a definite shift in this view, going from quite positive to very negative by the end of his 16 years. For anyone deciding to research Dr. Brown, I strongly suggest listening to the interviews; they contain a vast source of information.

Lastly, I must thank Dr. Leslie. His own personal knowledge of both Dr. Brown, and the events surrounding his presidency was more than helpful. Without his help, this paper would not have turned out the way it did.

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