

**James H. Albertson, an Innovative Leader and his Legacy:
The Albertson Learning Resource Center, a Collaborative Center of Innovation**

In 1970, the dedication of the James H. Albertson Center for Learning Resources noted: "The building is tall, stately and filled with a bank of knowledge to help prepare young people for the challenges and problems of tomorrow. It is much like the man it memorializes. For Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point the expansive new Albertson Center is more than a reminder of someone who guided the campus as president...The facility reflects a philosophy of education that came to this institution in Central Wisconsin when Dr. Albertson was appointed president." Albertson believed students need more than books to make learning a meaningful experience. The full range of communication media should be available for the university community, and Albertson set out to establish these resources in a huge building that was to be the physical heart and center of the institution. Albertson laid plans for the learning resource center and referred to it frequently as one of his prime goals for the campus. His philosophy of utilizing every available tool to promote the learning process is kept alive in the structure now bearing his name.

James H. Albertson, at the age of 36 became the eighth president of Wisconsin State College-Stevens Point (WSC-SP), assuming his office on 1 July 1962. He followed in the significant footsteps of President William C. Hansen, who had held office since 1940. Wisconsin State-Stevens Point, along with all of American higher education and its universities, was entering into a new frontier for higher education. American higher education was experiencing unprecedented growth, both in enrollment and curriculum, as the baby boom generation began entering American colleges. New horizons in American higher education opened as educators looked to extend modern visions through exploration and collaboration. Albertson was one who held such a vision.

Albertson's energy and academic motivation fit the mold of the bright and emerging generation of the early 1960's and President John F. Kennedy's *New Frontier*. Born September 3, 1925 in Brush, Colorado, Albertson obtained bachelor's and master's degrees from Colorado State University, then attended the University of Washington from 1951-52 before transferring to Stanford University for his EdD. Albertson taught in the Seattle public schools in 1949-50, settling into a personal pattern characterized by active civic duty, professional advancement, and an appreciation for diversity. Albertson's rising star in higher education began with his return to his alma mater as an associate professor, then director of admissions, the director of the college union, and coordinator of student activities for Colorado State from 1950-57. In 1957, Albertson arrived at Ball State College, Muncie, Indiana, to fill the newly created office of executive assistant to Ball State President John R. Emens. He sharpened his administrative skills at Ball State from 1957-62, assisting in a thorough reorganization of Ball State's administrative structure. Albertson was ready for new challenges and on April 11, 1962 the Muncie, Indiana newspapers ran a special story announcing that the Ball State administrator had accepted the presidency of Wisconsin State College-Stevens Point (WSC-SP), effective July 1, 1962.

Albertson directed his energies at his new institution with both educational and civic service. He set WSC-SP on a course of steady growth and change, bringing new ideas to the campus and the community. In 1962, WSC-SP, with an enrollment of some 2,500 students, was one of seven state-supported colleges in Wisconsin. 50% of the student body was enrolled in teacher education and the remainder primarily in liberal arts and pre-professional curriculum. During his tenure WSC-SP experienced unprecedented growth, evolving from College to University. Its new president moved in modern alignment with a budding national philosophy of shared government, as he called for increased faculty participation in the formation of university policies. President Albertson suggested that the faculty form two new policy councils, the academic council and the student affairs council, at the same time proposing the faculty discharge eleven "president's committees" and work toward the development of a faculty senate.

The young president and the college's receptive faculty worked together to develop new advisory committees for long-range planning, including the formation of the Wisconsin Stevens Point Foundation and Board of Visitors. Having quickly instituted reforms to the college's governance structure, President Albertson called for a complete reappraisal of the undergraduate curriculum with his initial inaugural address. Noteworthy change came in the addition of a three-credit general degree requirement in non-western cultural studies and several new majors. In alignment with Albertson's attraction for cultural literacy were new majors in American Civilization, Latin American Studies, and Russian and Eastern Europe. In addition, speech pathology and audiology (later renamed communicative disorders), physical education for women, business administration, and forestry (which signaled new horizons opening in Natural Resources) all were new majors aimed at career development. Albertson's background in student personnel work led amicably to the initiation of a Student Affairs Division at the university providing support services, bolstering student government and volunteerism.

Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point

Wisconsin State College-Stevens Point became Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point (WSU-SP) in 1964. In 1966, the Board of Regents called upon each institution to design a "mission statement" charting its goals in terms of 5 and 15-year plans. Optimism lined Albertson's report, highlighted by curricular review and visions of expansion in most sectors. The WSU-SP stratagem included a possible experimental college, an overseas study program, an honors program, and sabbatical program for faculty. On line with the presumably interminable climb in undergraduate enrollments, graduate education evolved during the Albertson term, as a successful cooperative program garnered support for each individual state university to institute graduate programs. In 1964, WSU-SP granted its first two master's degrees from a fledgling program in education. By 1967, thirty-eight graduate degrees had been awarded as graduate studies expanded. As additional graduate programs developed, dialogue even gave consideration to a cooperative doctorate with the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Higher education across America was undergoing dramatic reformation and expansion, not removed from turbulent social and economic changes associated with the Civil Rights movement, exploration of space, Cold War, assassination of the American president, and war in Vietnam. WSU-SP was linked to a national and state phenomenon of academic and institutional growth. Enrollment rose from 2,407 in 1962 to 5,907 in 1967, with annual estimates being exceeded by an average of 1,000 into 1970. By 1967, multiculturalism at WSU-SP was enhanced as students from 12 countries were enrolled. Visions of the future were becoming instant realizations, with unimagined strains on facilities and faculties. Faculty numbers mushroomed from 160 in 1960 to about 400 in 1967. Plans for the rapidly expanding campus were reliant on land acquisition, community relations, street closings, and removal of property from the tax rolls, as the construction began in dormitories, food service centers, classroom buildings, an expanded University Center, and plans for the replacement of the University Library (ultimately named the Albertson Center for Learning Resources) and a new Fine Arts Center.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

WSU-SP and its young president were representative of their times. President Albertson looked to augment the campus's international participation as he envisioned WSU-SP as a leader in both innovative programming and cultural awareness, a commitment that led to a cultural mission in Vietnam. In this sense, the University became a model of institutional development for newly developing states of the world. Seemingly, Albertson, while at Ball State, had come in contact with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Professor Robert R. LaFollette (a cousin of the Wisconsin LaFollette family) had left Ball State in 1961, and then became USAID higher education adviser to Vietnam in 1964. It was in 1964 that the USAID and the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education presented WSU-SP with a grant to provide for an international intern from the Philippines to come to WSU-SP to study administrative procedures. A second USAID grant came to WSU-SP in the spring of 1966 appealing for Albertson to serve as chief-of-team, forming a group of seven American educators to go to Vietnam and conduct a survey of higher education in the Republic of Vietnam and draft recommendations for its improvement. Albertson noted concerns over the unpopularity of the war in Vietnam, but his educational leadership and collaborative ideals favoring cultural exchange led him to envision the contract as a means for stabilization.

In January 1967, Albertson departed for Vietnam, heading a seven member team composed of: Harry F. Bangsberg, President Bemidji States College; A. Donald Beattie, Dean of the School of Business and Economics, Wisconsin State University-Whitewater; Vincent F. Conroy, Director of Field Studies, Harvard University; Howard G. Johnshoy, Dean of Academic Affairs, Gustavus Adolphus College; Arthur D. Pickett, Director of Honors Programs, University of Illinois-Chicago; and Melvin L. Wall, Head of Plant and Earth Sciences, Wisconsin State University-River Falls. They were joined in Vietnam by Robert LaFollette, USAID, Saigon Office. From 1967 to 1974 WSU-SP served as the principal American institutional adviser to RVN Ministry of Education (MOE) on higher education. In Vietnam, the objectives of the Wisconsin Contract expanded substantially during the more than six years of its existence as the USAID mission moved from a general-survey, to an action-plan, to a "brick-laying" operation. Over time, some fifty different consultants worked under the banner of the Wisconsin Team, producing thirty-eight major reports and surveys.

The Wisconsin Team

As the Wisconsin Team prepared to enter Vietnam, the end of 1966 had marked a significant turning point in American educational assistance to Vietnam. The Team, for a period of three to six months, would consult with counterpart GVN officials, the USAID Mission to Vietnam, and Vietnamese educators, to sequentially attain and organize the necessary information and data. Touring five Vietnamese institutes of higher education, the team

immediately noted that the existing curriculum accentuating classical and French studies was ill-suited for a total enrollment of some 34,000 Vietnamese. Chief-of-Party Albertson pointed to this limitation as he asserted that there was an absolute need for curricula more in tune with:

the immediate needs of the developing country...that this [was] a country trying to do battle on two fronts—the military and the reconstruction front...as we sat and listened...in the distance were flying American planes dropping bombs on the VC...It will be a long time before I forget what I saw and learned this morning...I continue to be amazed at how much these people have been able to accomplish in waging a major war...and at the same time carrying on a program of higher education.

Upon his return to WSU-SP in February 1967, Albertson worked to organize a second USAID educational contract to evaluate elementary, secondary, vocational, technical, and adult education in the Republic of Vietnam. He returned to Vietnam in early March of 1967. President Albertson and the Wisconsin Team accepted a mission not of “nation-building,” but a collaborative mission working with Vietnamese counterparts, to construct “public universities” as social institutions deeply connected to the essence of Vietnamese history, its culture and people. His own words ring true of his qualities of innovative leadership and insightful cultural understanding:

My position has been, if they [the USAID] want a blueprint it has to be a Vietnamese blueprint. If they [the Vietnamese] want some help from America we could come in and help provide some guidelines, some areas within which they—then could divide and we could work with the Vietnamese one-on-one. What it means is getting a team together of educators, people who have a breath experience, who are willing to bend with wind—this is a phrase you see over and over there—who want to work with Vietnamese counterparts and who have some idea of the basic tenants of an educational system, whether it is in Afghanistan or Vietnam or the United States.

On Good Friday, March 23, 1967, an early morning phone call was received in Stevens Point from the USAID Washington. On route to Hue from Saigon, bad weather the day before had forced the chartered twin-engine Air America plane carrying the Wisconsin Team back to DaNang to refuel. The pilot and Team made a fateful decision to make a second attempt to cross through the mountains in a turbulent rain storm, the attempt ended in a disastrous crash 200 feet short of a mountain peak north of DaNang. There were no survivors as the pilot, the USAID Mission education advisor, and all seven members of the Wisconsin-led higher education survey team were killed.

The Albertson Legacy

WSU-SP President James H. Albertson and the members of the Wisconsin Team embarked on an educational mission during a time when their own institutions were experiencing unprecedented growth. They carried with them a vision for education and reform that was accompanied by a semblance of order, rational wisdom, and autonomous change. Their vision was embodied with democratic ideals and emancipation for education during a time when humanity exploded around them. Over the course of this time in history the WSU-SP campus and community represented a model of successful growth and modernization, a paradigm from which others could readily comprehend progressive institutional development. Such a vision, modeled by educators in a different time and different place remains relevant for all of us today. Their readiness and willingness to share their educational expertise and life work remains a model for all of who continue to strive to change with new times while agelessly preserving the values of freedom with the expansion of educational opportunity.

President Albertson exemplified educational wisdom and natural vision for modern education, born from the days of New Frontiers and dominos. His ideals would endure the tragedy of that fatal plane crash on a stormy Vietnamese mountain side, and grow within the cloudburst of a thunderous revolution to evolve into lasting modern foundations of higher education for a unified Vietnam. President Albertson’s vision was entrusted to history itself, as one man’s best laid plans were cast upon the winds of fateful change. Today, President Albertson’s progressive educational ideals remain eternally relevant and consequential for higher education, both locally and globally. In a real sense, one small chapter in educational reform from Stevens Point stands as a living legacy of the work of this man and the other educators of the Wisconsin Team for their university, for Vietnam, and for university-governmental agency relations and American assistance programs across the globe. Truly, President Albertson opened new frontiers in education, both in Stevens Point and in a far away land; he reached for the moon, knowing that others would shine.

Eugene McPhee, Executive Director of the Wisconsin State University System, summed up the anguish of the moment extolling the “courage of those who gave their lives for a cause in which they believed deeply... [they were] front line soldiers in the long range war of ideas.” The *Stevens Point Journal* depicted Albertson as an “inventive, bold, resourceful, articulate...a collaborative model of personal integrity and high quality.” Regent Mary Williams cited President Albertson’s “capacity for hard work, his idealism, his persuasive and enthusiastic personality.” On 2 July 1967, a ceremony was held at the University of Saigon posthumously awarding the *Chuong My Vietnamese Medals of Merit First Class* to James H. Albertson and the seven other educators killed in the plane crash.

In the months that followed, the Regents appointed UW-Madison Professor of Communication Lee Sherman Dreyfus as the ninth president of WSU-SP on October 2, 1967. The new president arrived at WSU-SP during a time of brisk expansion. In part, Dreyfus’ own unorthodox quest to place WSU-SP on the road to cultural and educational pre-eminence in central Wisconsin and higher education represented a sustained augmentation of the reforms and innovative administrative themes associated with President Albertson and the young professionals who had helped initiate Albertson’s philosophy. There is little doubt that Dreyfus benefited from the things Albertson had already set in motion, along with the shear momentum of institutional growth. Dreyfus set new goals for the University that employed an even stronger emphasis on new technologies and internationalization. WSU-SP, according to Dreyfus, was to become a “twenty-first century campus,” as television, and later computers, were tools that would enhance and share educational resources nationwide and “change the process of learning, improve its efficiency, and...do a better job with fewer resources.

The Albertson Medallion

In 1967, President Dreyfus inaugurated the Albertson Medallion. This award annually honors those graduating students who have exemplified Albertson’s outstanding persona as a leader, a scholar, and as a citizen on campus and in his/her community.

The James H. Albertson Center for Learning Resources

The Albertson Learning Resources Center was/is central to the educational mission of its campus, opening with an affirmed philosophy of providing all forms of educational media, print and non-print alike, freely accessible to all, a philosophy that Albertson himself had lived by. The building housed the University Library, a federal government publications depository, other special collections, a natural history museum, a tutoring laboratory, a television studio, and other special service areas. In the 1980’s, the Albertson Learning Resources Center was the site of a major \$8.3 million expansion project, with the construction of two side wing additions and a new sixth floor over the entire building. The building addition was completed for the opening of the academic year in 1986. In 1986-87, the James H. Albertson Learning Resource Center became the technological heartbeat of the campus as the Information/Technology Systems Network was established in the building’s basement. The James H. Albertson Center for Learning Resources (commonly called the “LRC”) stands daily as a testament of President Albertson’s intellectual and humane prowess for all of those once touched and those who continue to be influenced. President Albertson demonstrated outstanding educational leadership and integrity, which has left a permanent imprint on the entire university. The James H. Albertson Center for Learning Resources has evolved and modeled leadership with its added depth of resources and technology from which countless students and community members have drawn inspiration and academic enrichment. The LRC remains central to the University’s educational mission, a model of collaboration between University Library, Information Technology, Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement, Natural History Museum, Tutoring and Learning Center, and more. Collaborative programs and support have become mainstays for the Albertson Center. The Albertson legacy continues today as the LRC faces challenges in higher education. The Tutoring and Learning Center and University Library have long been a natural match. IT has recently supported an expansion of database offerings by the University Library through student tech fee support, which are reviewed annually. The Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement and University Library are co-sponsoring a variety of programs in collaborative teaching and new faculty development. The Natural History Museum and Library have collaborated on numerous displays and outreach programs. Old and new ideas will always encounter challenges, challenges made manageable and vibrant by Albertson’s ideals – to collaborate, innovate, and create.

About the Text

The text is excerpted from *Higher Education in Vietnam: United States Agency for International Development Contract in Education, Wisconsin State University – Stevens Point and Republic of Vietnam*. Written by, Tom Reich. Collection Development Librarian/Professor, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.