

Welcome to Through a Common Lens a podcast to prepare for UMKC's HLC accreditation site visit.

This is Alexis Petri.

I have five episodes planned and will release one each week up until the site visit. This is episode one titled "Well, Run It."

This episode features Chris Wolfe manager of UMKC bookstores and author of a pearl of Great Value the history of UMKC, Kansas City's University.

In this episode, Chris tells us about UMKC's history as it pertains to accreditation. You will hear many familiar names from buildings to scholarships and be able to connect them with our University story.

Chris also discusses how Kansas City University came to join the University of Missouri system and dispels a few myths. Welcome Chris. What can you tell us about umkc's first attempt at accreditation?

Well, our first attempt at accreditation failed in 1937. There was conflict between our regional administrator whose name was Ernest Newcomb and the first president of the University named Duncan Spathe. Ernest Newcomb had originally been the executive secretary for the Board of Trustees and he was responsible for putting together all the curriculum for the school, for hiring all the professors, for remodeling the Dickey mansion. That was all put in his hands. He was paid very little for this but he did it out of his love for the University that had developed from all the hard work he put into it. Mr. Volker helped him and his family of course. And so, when the university started in 1933, you know, everybody suspected that trustees were just going to name him as the president and they didn't they didn't give him any defined Powers. They too said run it.

Who were the trustees? + did they have much experience with an endeavor like a college or a university?

These were all businessmen from Kansas City - engineers, lawyers, doctors and manufacturers and they didn't know anything about higher education. Mr. Volker didn't know anything about higher education. They all leaned on Ernest Newcomb and said, well we're on it. Well, he didn't have any defined powers. He did have experience - he had been the administrator of a Methodist Women's College called Central College in Lexington. So he had experienced but he didn't really have you know, written backing from the trustees. At the end of the first year, he arbitrarily fired three professors and this caused an outrage amongst the students. No due process. This is unfair. You didn't even tell them they weren't up to standards, you just fired them. It caused a protest.

The protest embarrassed the university and decided they need to have a formal president, instead of naming Ernest Newcomb president. They needed an academic so they hired a Shakespearean scholar named Duncan Spathe from Princeton University to be the president. Duncan Spathe had poor health, as did his wife. It took him a year to get here. So we went through 1934 1935 with the Ernest Newcomb as the de facto president without any official authority. When Duncan Spathe got here, he was named president of the University. But Ernest Newcomb was still the executive secretary of the university and the Board of Trustees and had no defined powers. It was just a ripe environment for the conflict between these two men. And so when it came time for accreditation, they came and interviewed us and everybody said these two are at each other's throats.

It's an unhealthy relationship and it's a mess. And so the accreditors went back to the trustees and said hey, this is what we discovered. You need to clean your house up before we can give you accreditation. And so they ended up firing Duncan Spathe. On his way out, he said, "well, you should consider hiring Clarence Decker who is chair of the English Department to replace me."

Decker was very wily he to some degree was working behind the scenes already getting various trustees on his side. When in December of 1937 the trustees approached Dr. Decker, he said he would step in and take over the university. Ernest Newcomb was snubbed again. He was very upset and he went to the chair of the Board of Trustees, Ernest Howard.

Howard asked him when was the last time he took a vacation, wrote him a check for a few hundred dollars and sent Newcomb on vacation with his family to cool off. So Earnest takes a vacation and comes back early January 1938 and finds his desk in the hallway. He saw the writing on the wall that there was no place for him anymore. And so he left the university and would never return. In 1938 Clarence Decker becomes president of the University of Kansas City. Our administration is in more stable hands and so the creditors are invited back that fall and we're given accreditation.

Well, I'm glad we eventually got a credited. I have here a letter from the north central Association of Colleges and Secondary schools to address to President Clarence E Decker. The letter reads "My dear President Decker. The board of review has voted unanimously to accredit the University of Kansas City as a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary schools. We believe that your institution is in a strategic position to render a large Educational Service to the area in which is it is located. Yours, very truly, AJ Brumbaugh.

Part 2: Problems with Dr. Dekker's vision

There's a new come home, but there's nothing for dr. Decker. There is nothing for dr. Decker. So why is that? So, dr. Decker had a vision of the University that it was an elite liberal arts college. That's the kind of college. He went. He went to Carleton College in Minnesota to this day an elite liberal arts school, and he you know, there's always the debate, you know is a college education.

And supposed to build the character of a citizen or they're supposed to be job training. Well, dr. Decker firmly came down on the side that it is supposed to build the character of a citizen and he's and that's what a liberal arts education did for him. And he believed that was the main mission of the University. However over the years that he was President here the university grew beyond that Vision by Leaps and Bounds we merged with the Kansas City School of Law 1938 the Western Dental

College 1942 in the Kansas City School of Pharmacy in 1943. So we were adding professional schools becoming a comprehensive University whether he liked it or not and he was not shy about expressing his opinions that those professional schools were secondary in importance. They were job training vocational education, our mission was teaching the liberal arts and building scholars, and character-- you know character for citizens.

Students wanted intercollegiate athletics. We wanted to compete against other schools in baseball and basketball and they wanted national fraternities to come to the university. We view ourselves as being on par with KU or mu though, you know, those were our closest universities and our students that we you know, we're every bit as good as those universities and what are we lacking athletics and fraternities and sororities.

The students would go to Dr. Decker and they'd say Hey, you know, we want this and you say okay, I'll consider I'll consider it and then never would consider it in 1953 this all kind of came to a head. You know, he had Ford visit administrators including his his Provost all resigned one day and they went to the trustees. They turned in their letters of Resignation and said we're resigning from our positions because we believe that Dr.

Decker's vision is the biggest impediment to this University's growth the faculties of the professional schools backed these administrators and one of those administrators. Actually, the Provost was Norman Royall who also has a building named after him. He went he went back to becoming a math and physics Professor after he was Provost and the faculty of the professional schools backed these administrators because they believe the same thing. They didn't get any support from the University they were

Left to manage themselves raise their own money. There was no comprehensive strategy as a university that included them. In fact, when the School of Pharmacy was first emerged in 1943. Dr. Decker tried to make pharmacy a Department of the College of Arts and Sciences and that had the alumni of the pharmacy school up in arms. They were like, no way you're going to give them less status than the school of dentistry. And so they demanded that they be made a unit or school just like Dentistry or Law. The trustees had relied on Dr. Decker to run the university for 13 or 14 years. These men didn't know anything about higher education. And so they just relied on Dr. Decker and knew what he told them. A lot of this was just out of left field for them. And so they backed Dr. Decker and when this first started he offered to resign and they said no no, no you fix it.

Well, that spring of 1953 things really came to a head when these administrators resigned and the faculties of the professional schools were in revolt. They all voted no confidence in Dr Decker. The students, hearing all this, got together to decide what to do. They gathered in the University Playhouse and heard two competing sides. The president of the student body came up and said well, we just need a cooling-off period you know, we don't want to be hasty. One of the men of the Bounders fraternity got up and said those administrators were right. Dr. Decker is holding us back. He's been promising us athletics. He's been promising us fraternities. He's been promising us enrollment growth, that would be a bigger university. It hasn't happened. The students voted no confidence in Dr. Decker and he next day he resigned.

Now his replacement was a man named Earl McGrath who had been the commissioner of education for the United States, which today is the Secretary of the Department of Education. So he was the highest ranking educational official in the US government and he was a friend of one of the Board of Trustees members named David Beale who is a chairman of a bank here in Kansas City. David Beale invited him to come to Kansas City. He liked what he saw here.

He accepted the job. That summer, before he could start, the chairman of the Board of Trustees whose name was Ernest Howard, passed away. Howard was the original man who had hired Dr. Decker way back in the day. David Beale became chair of the trustees. Now the university had completely new leadership - new head of the trustees, new president. They had the you know backing to do whatever they wanted basically.

What are all McGrath wanted to do was change our mission from a liberal arts Focus to a comprehensive Urban serving University. To that end he established the School of Business and Public

Administration and the School of Education to serve that new Mission. And then of course he brought in athletics and eventually fraternities and sororities great.

Wow, what a history.

Park three: selling Kansas City on Kansas City's University.

Mr. Volker was here we can always just turn to his checkbook. But after he passed away, you know, it was very difficult for them to raise money to sell Kansas City on this vision of a university. By the late 1950s, they had to go and raise the operating funds that was the shortfall after tuition just to survive for that year. Forget about raising money for an endowment or residence halls or transforming the university. They needed to raise money to survive the year.

I thought we were founded as Kansas City's University. Where were the Civic leaders?

They were very supportive but you know, it was a private university. So, you know, we had to raise our own money. When we got to the late 50s, you know, the University of Missouri started making new approaches to us and they said hey, you know, we are thinking of expanding to Kansas City.

Why don't you make it easy on yourselves and on us and just become part of the University of Missouri? Well, the Trustees were very proud. Some of these men had been part of the University since the 20s and they had, you know poured in not only their own money but their hearts and souls into this institution. They valued the freedom of having a private university. They didn't want bureaucrats to tell them how to run the university right? And so they said absolutely not. The financial situation deteriorated. McGrath's vice president or Provost was a man named Richard Drake and Richard Drake tried his heart out to raise money for this University. He's actually started up like the Alumni Association and there was a booster group called The University Associates that was composed of local businessmen that were a boosters for the University. That got people like Robert Florsheim and Henry block involved in the university. But it was just too difficult to raise the amount of money we needed and in 1961 the trustees came to him and said, you know, you're going to have to cut hundreds of thousands of dollars from the budget this year because we're just not going to make it. He cut KCUR and athletics. The students were furious and staged a huge protest on campus. They built a giant bonfire just south of Schofield Hall on the quad and a threw effigies of the trustees on it and jumped around and yelled, "We want sports," while the trustees effigies burned. It was a huge embarrassment to the university. The fallout was that Richard Drake resigned. The Trustees turned to Drake's Provost, a man named Carlton Schofield and said we're going to need you to step in and be president. He said absolutely not and they said, well you have to you have to help us out and he goes I will become interim president under two conditions. First you restore the money for KCUR and second you immediately begin a search for a new president and I will not be a candidate. Schofield becomes acting president in 1961. He starts getting overtures from the University of Missouri. Elmer Ellis was President the University of Missouri system at the time. MU said hey, we want to expand to Kansas City. If you don't merge with us, we're just going to come buy some land and build a new University in Kansas City. Well, that would mean the death knell for University of Kansas City. Carlton Schofield put together a projection for the trustees of how much money the university would lose each year all the way to 1970 going out about 10 years and it was millions of dollars. By the time we got to 1970 our shortfall would be millions of dollars and there is no way that University could ever be able to raise that much money. Well, one of the most influential members of the Board of Trustees were the man named Arthur Mag, who was a very prominent lawyer here in Kansas City. He was Harry Truman's

personal lawyer actually despite being a staunch Republican. Arthur Mag more than anybody valued the freedom of a private university. He had been on the Board of Trustees from the very beginning and put his heart and soul into this university. Carlton Schofield was able to persuade him to his position that we needed to merge. Once Arthur mag said, yes, we need to merge, the rest of the trustees agreed. And so 1963 we officially merged with the University of Missouri and became UMKC.

Very very cool. So what do you think is most uncommon about UMKC's history that influences the university to this day?

Well, what's most uncommon is our complete and utter lack of knowledge of our history. Yes, you go to the zoo you go to hey, you you walk on that campus and you are steeped in its history the second you walk in, you know, it's everywhere and you're you just You Feel It in the Air that's not the case here and there's a variety of reasons historical and geographical. We were always intended to be a commuter campus.

From the very beginning, they didn't build their first residence hall here at the University until 1956. And then it was only a few hundred beds, right, you know, and for many years we had over 10,000 students and only a handful basically lived here on campus and I we've tried to correct that in the last 20 years. We built the Oak Street residence hall in 2004 and then Johnson Hall in 2008 and then the apartment buildings here in on Hospital Hill but overall with you know population of

In some thousand students just a handful live here on campus. So the vast majority of our students are driving here every day. Many of them are working. The average age of our student is you know, like 26 years old and that's because we have so many graduate programs so many professional schools. To build that story tradition of history and tradition you have to have undergrads. And you know, the undergrads we've had our commuter students for so many years, they all have this vague notion that Walt Disney drew the first kangaroo mascot and they're all pretty certain that Epperson house is haunted but that's it. That's what links the generations. Where as you go to Mizzou or KU, it's a whole different story. A huge pride of alma mater has lacking here. Is it fixable, I think so.

I've done, you know quite a you know, quite a few things to try to you know, to start the university off in that direction including writing a book about the University's history, but also doing like tours and that kind of thing. I know the future for the University will hinge on our ability to rediscover our past and our traditions.

Part 5: Full circle.

To achieve our enrollment goals is going to require building that community that sense of tradition and history because when students come here, yes, they want an education. Some want that education to make them a good citizen and some want to get a job. What they all want is the college experience. When I interview students to work here at the bookstore. My very first question. I always ask them is well, why did you choose to come to UMKC? So many times the answer is when I got to this campus. I felt like I belonged here. Well, we've got to we've got to make them believe they belong here. We need to have something beyond a nice environment for them to want to stay. Some history some traditions some reason that they are proud to be here. This history is my history. This is my tradition. This is my alma mater, from a historical perspective.

What are our pride points?

Well, I mean, I think our biggest pride point is that we were founded to be Kansas City's University. We were to be a cultural achievement for Kansas City. Some of the men who put this University together were instrumental in building the Liberty Memorial. And the Liberty Memorial was intended to put us on the map and make us a city like Cincinnati or Chicago or St. Louis so that we were not just some hick cow town, even though you could smell the cows from downtown. We're not some hick cow town. Everybody from Kansas City has had the experience when they meet people from the East Coast or the west coast and they'll say stuff to you, only half-jokingly, like will do you guys still have horses and buggy. I mean, right, you know it just this opinion of us that we're from the 19th century. Right? So Kansas City's always had this kind of inferiority complex because of those attitudes. Well, the Liberty Memorial was supposed to put us on the map. A great Monument that was going to make us, you know, a proud modern city. William Volker who is instrumental in building the Liberty Memorial wanted to build a university instead. He told the other Trustees of the Liberty Memorial that hey, you know that this Tower of concrete is great and all but what we need is a university. Something that's more beneficial and long-lasting. They pooh-poohed him and said if you want to build a university do it yourself. That is exactly what he did and his intention was that it would be a cultural monument to put us on the map. It would make us a city like Cleveland or Cincinnati or Chicago or St. Louis, which all had their own universities. And we didn't so that was a you know, the original idea behind us. It was also supposed to be kind of a working man's university for those people in Kansas City that couldn't afford to send their kids back east or to KU or to Mizzou, but still wanted higher education for their children. Well now they would and so

That was really different for the 30s, during the depression, and this is before the GI bill, right which really grew post-secondary education.

Yeah, and Mr. Volker was instrumental in all this of course. Our First Student Loan Fund was Mr. Volker's checking account. Students would go to him and say hey, I'd like to go to the University of Kansas City. I can't afford the tuition. He would pay for them.

Before we wrap up, what are your favorite UMKC Urban myths? Here's a chance to dispel them.

All right, the one I love to dispel that I hear all the time. Is that Walt Disney went to elementary school here on campus. So right Grant Hall was an elementary school Walt Disney did go to elementary school in Kansas City, but it was not at Nelson Elementary School. It was at Benton Elementary School, which is at 35th and Prospect, right? So he did not go to school here.

A couple others. I love the story that the house where the University news is published which is just south of the university on Holmes street that that house is haunted. Back in the 70s, it was home to Newletters or KCUR radio and one day someone walked in and shot up the studio and killed the host and the guest. Now the house is haunted by those people who were murdered. Well that never happened. I don't know how that story got started, but whether or not the house is haunted or not? I'll leave that to you guys to determine.

This has been really eye-opening and informative. Thank you.

You're welcome.

A huge thank you to Chris Wolf, manager of UMKC bookstores, and author of a *Pearl of Great Value: The history of UMKC, Kansas City's University*.

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Thank you.