Elwin Fite, acting president of Northeastern, had been a professor and administrator at the Tahlequah school for almost a quarter of a century. Employed in 1953 as an associate professor of music, in 1958 he transferred from the division of fine arts to the division of education and psychology as coordinator of secondary education. Named division chairman four years later, Fite remained in that position until 1963 when he became dean of the college. Until he received a phone call from the president of the Board of Regents for Oklahoma Colleges in the afternoon of July 21, 1978, Fite had no idea that he would be asked to lead the school until a new president could be hired.¹

Since the regents estimated that a new president would not be appointed for about six months, Fite was expected to take whatever action was necessary to meet the next bond payment and restore harmony on campus. The first manifestation of new leadership at Northeastern concerned the dormitories. Charles Waldie’s “responsible freedom” had caused security concerns, although residency had increased slightly after its initial semester. Critics of the plan charged that “all it created were chaotic conditions, in which rowdiness, theft, and personal assault were the order of the day.” At Fite’s direction rules relaxed during the Collier administration were re-imposed. Specifically, visiting hours, which had been unlimited in all but a few special interest floors, were set from 8 to 11 p.m., Sunday through Thursday, and 9 p.m. to 1 a.m., Friday and Saturday, in all dorms except Wilson Hall, which was restricted to students over 21.²

In explaining the administration’s reason for rescinding the liberal visitation policy, Dr. John Lowe, vice president for student affairs, said, “It was necessary to restrict visitation because if the dormitories had open hours more problems could erupt than the

---

¹ “Dr. Elwin Fite Appointed NEOSU’s Acting President,” Northeastern, 27 July 1977, 1.
² Pam Grunewald, “Residential Life Director Resigns Position, Northeastern, 8 September 1977, 1 and 8.
existing housing staff could handle effectively.” Dr. Fite stressed the university’s obligation to provide “wholesome and safe conditions in all activities on campus.” In the discussion of visitation hours, no one suggested that rules requiring coeds to be in their dorms by specific times each evening be re-imposed. To save money on personnel manning the residence hall entrances, however, early in the spring semester of 1978, the doors on all dorms were locked from 2 a.m. until 8 a.m. to provide better security for the residents.3

Few residents of the dorms shared the administration’s views on limiting visitation. An editorial in the first student newspaper during the fall semester called the new policy “one giant step backwards” and claimed, “this action has caused a great deal of concern and anger among those living in the dorms.” The writer admitted, “no one can deny that the policy of ‘responsible freedom’ has had its problems,” but he pointed out that those attending NEOSU, whose average age was in the mid-twenties, are “not likely to relish being treated like children.” A student in the 18- to 21-year-old age group, the editorialist continued, “has the right to vote, pays taxes, and is held legally responsible for his actions. Males are liable for military service. . . . If a person has the responsibilities of an adult then that person should be treated like one.”4

Waldie, who had threatened to resign as director of residential life in the spring, submitted his resignation in September and accepted a position as housing director at Rutgers University in New Jersey. “Up until Dr. Collier was dismissed I still had a reason to believe my housing system could operate for another year,” Waldie said. “However, since then it has been made abundantly clear that I do not have the authority or backing at the right level.” The student senate threatened legal action against the university, and residents launched a boycott against the university center. Some two hundred students attended a rally in front of Seminary Hall to discuss the school’s housing policy. The group approved an administration proposal to create a student-faculty committee to resolve the issue, but overwhelmingly rejected a motion to end the boycott. Jim Calloway, the student senate president, predicted, “This type of ultra-conservative attitude from the administration can only lead to a mass exodus from the dorms at the end of the contract period.”5

4 “One Giant Step Backwards——” Northeastern, 8 September 1977, 2.
After several days, the boycott, observed primarily by dorm residents, was called off.

Before the committee could complete its deliberations, the university restructured the student organization governing the resident halls, and the board of regents reemphasized its insistence that Northeastern must meet its financial obligations to the bondholders. The administration working with dorm residents scrapped the residential life community council, the representative body created to implement the concept of “responsible freedom.” Instead of a single council representing all dormitory residents, six community review and recognition boards were established, one for each dorm. It was hoped the new structure would be more responsive to the needs of residence halls than the council had been and would be able to address problems more effectively.

On September 23, the Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges met in Tahlequah to seek local views on the selection of a new president for the university. Tahlequah mayor, Tony Stockton, told the board, “He (the new president) should not be saddled with the complete responsibility for bonding indebtedness. This, in my opinion as a banker, is the responsibility of the regents and the state of Oklahoma, which approved them.” The president of the regents replied, “It’s impossible for us to keep from saddling the president with that problem. That’s something he will have to solve.”

Chaired by Dr. Ralph Whitworth, professor of music, the joint committee of five students and five faculty members, established to investigate university housing policy, held its first meeting on Thursday, September 15. After conducting extensive hearings, the members recommended the adoption of a housing policy similar to the one used at Oklahoma State University, but with more visitation hours. Hours proposed were from 3 to 11 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and 1 p.m. to 1 a.m., Friday and Saturday, and 1 to 11 p.m. on Sunday. The committee report recommended that student dormitory coordinators be replaced by non-student dormitory directors and that a full-time housing director and student residents for each dorm floor be hired. Other recommendations called for twenty-four-hour check-in desk attendants, and creation of a faculty-student committee to monitor housing and meal service.

---

Presented to the student senate and administration for approval, the proposal provoked heated debate in the senate where a tie vote was broken by the president who sided with the opponents of the committee’s recommendations. Within a week, however, the president of the senate reversed his opinion and vetoed a proposal to reject the committee’s recommendations. In explaining his change of views, Calloway said he had decided that compromise was the only solution and increasing visiting hours was in the best interest of the residents of the dorms. Speaking for the administration, Dr. John Lowe, vice president of student affairs, pointed out that the proposed changes would cost more money. He reported that steps were being taken to provide more personnel to supervise the expansion of dorm hours, but warned that the changes could not be fully implemented until they could be incorporated into the budget for the next fiscal year.

In addition to the recommendations of the committee, its chairman Dr. Whitworth issued a separate statement pointing out that the preoccupation of school administrators with the bond problems and the need to maximize revenue were having a detrimental effect on the students and the learning environment, contributing to student unrest, and eroding the student-faculty relationship. Citing the refusal of the regents to assist the university in resolving its financial crisis, the committee chairman observed that the projections of enrollment growth, which prompted the construction of dormitories in the 1960s were based on studies by the regents. Furthermore, he pointed out the decision to increase the number of junior colleges, which precipitated the decline in dorm occupancy at Northeastern, was made by the regents, not the Tahlequah school’s administration. He added, “The problems did not originate in Tahlequah and the solution cannot be found here in Tahlequah.” Attributing the death of Harrell Garrison to the “worry and stress over auxiliary systems finance,” and the dismissal of Robert Collier as a result of the same problem, Whitworth asked, “How long can the situation persist before we stop worrying about who might ‘look bad’ or searching for a person to serve as a ‘scapegoat’ or ‘sacrificial lamb’?”

---

The rising tide of opinion that the dormitory bond issue could not be resolved locally finally influenced the regents. At the monthly meeting in October, the body’s executive secretary stressed that it would be unconstitutional to burden the taxpayers of Oklahoma with the obligation of repaying the bond holders without a public vote. A member of the board confirmed the assessment, but he acknowledged, “We realize that the president can’t solve the problems. It has to be done on a state-wide basis.” The admission offered little consolation to Robert Collier, whose dismissal was directly related to his inability to resolve the bond payment issue.

Not everyone on the board of regents shared the view that Northeastern officials needed to help in resolving the financial crisis. At the November meeting of the board of regents of Oklahoma colleges, Vice President Lindsey Owsley reported that making the $550,000 bond payment in May would be difficult, but he assured the board it would be made. Ed Livermore, a board member from Edmond, informed Owsley that he personally held him “totally responsible” for “keeping the finances running smoothly.” The speaker of Oklahoma’s house of representatives apparently did not hold Owsley or other key Northeastern administrators personally responsible for resolving the university’s problem without outside assistance. In January Representative Bill Willis of Tahlequah and several other state lawmakers introduced a joint resolution calling for the state treasurer to purchase the bonds. In February the senate passed legislation to create a $200,000 revolving fund to help state schools avoid defaulting on their bonds. The measure was blocked by opponents, which meant the issue was one of the first to demand the attention of the school’s next president when he took office.

The restrictive housing rules that provoked student opposition may have had beneficial consequences. In November, F.E. Frusher, head of campus security, reported fewer thefts, domestic problems, and traffic violations. While giving students credit for being more observant, he suggested, “The new dormitory rules may have had something to do with it.”

---

While the mass exodus of students from the dorms Calloway had predicted did not materialize, several key administrators, in addition to Waldie, resigned within the next year. In November, John Lowe, who had directed student affairs since 1969, submitted his resignation and announced his intention to return to full-time teaching effective June 30, 1978. In March 1978, James R. Reynolds resigned his position as director of auxiliary enterprises to accept a position at Texas A&M University. Near the end of the spring semester H.L. Helton, vice president for research and development asked to return to full-time teaching. David Eyman, director of the John Vaughan Library/Learning Resources Center, submitted his resignation in July to accept a position as director of a university library in Pennsylvania.  

Some of the positions were not filled immediately or were assigned as additional duty on an interim basis. Dr. Lena Belle Rotton, dean of student affairs under Lowe, was named chief administrative officer of student affairs, but her former position was not filled. Robert Smith, the manager of the university center bookstore, was named to replace Reynolds as interim director of auxiliary enterprises. Dr. Brad Agnew, associate professor of history, was reassigned to direct the library on an interim basis, and members of the history department assumed his teaching load.  

Students continued to complain about the university’s food service, particularly the price and quality of meals. A reporter for the student newspaper compared the cost of food at four city drive-ins and the University Center. She concluded, “It is apparent that the student on the meal point plan is paying a considerably larger amount for the same meal.” Apparently spurred by the article, members of the student senate passed a resolution calling for an investigation of the meal-point system, asserting, “paying 55 cents for forty cents worth of food appears at face value to be an obvious inequity.” In addition to calling for a review of the cost of food, the resolution also asked that the charge for room and board be studied.

---

16 “Regents Discuss Dorm Rates’ Select Interim U.C. Director,” *Northeastern*, 5 April 1978, 1.
James Reynolds, director of auxiliary enterprises, gave credence to student complaints about the high cost of food, explaining that it was “a direct result of pressure by university administrators to increase revenue in order to help pay housing bonds.” Although student complaints about bookstore prices had not reached the press, obviously disgruntled, Reynolds commented, “We took the jump to hyperspace in book store pricing this year. We are in the avant garde of university pricing.” The director of the university center said the facility’s cafeteria operation was approaching “near financial crisis.”  To operate more efficiently, the food service at the Spike, Store, and Point in the Leoser center complex was consolidated and hours of operation reduced. The number of vending machines in the center was increased to provide food and beverages during the hours when manned food service was unavailable.

The problems that confronted the school throughout the 1970s seemed to have had little impact on what occurred in the classroom. Despite students upset over restrictive housing policies and faculty members fearful of retrenchment, Northeastern’s academic routine continued much as it had in the past although the Tahlequah school followed the national trend of inflating grades. Some attributed the awarding of marks higher than student effort merited to a reluctance of instructor’s to jeopardize the deferred status of men subject to the draft. Low grades might condemn them to military service in the conflict in Vietnam that was becoming increasingly unpopular. Others suggested the growing number of A and B grades assigned by professors reflected the need to retain marginal students as enrollment faltered after the influx of baby boomers subsided.

Northeastern’s professional education curriculum, long recognized for its innovation and the quality of the teachers it produced, earned national attention in 1979. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) conferred its Distinguished Achievement Award on the university for its Educational Professionals for Indian Children (EPIC) program. The highest honor in the nation given for excellence in teacher education, the award recognized a program directed for the college by Dr. Fount Holland, professor of education. Since 1973, EPIC had

---

assisted 138 Native American students in obtaining teaching credentials; of that number 78% were then employed by public or Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. The award was the second Northeastern had earned in the decade. In 1971, the Cherokee Bilingual Education program had received the AACTE award.\textsuperscript{20}

The removal of President Collier did not quell all faculty discontent. The Northeastern chapter of the American Association of University Professors, the largest in the state with seventy members, led by Dr. Ivan Holmes, continued to question the compensation of the university faculty. A committee of the organization was appointed to investigate discrepancies between figures for the average faculty raise and salaries that were reported to the regents and lower averages it calculated. The organization also urged the administration to consider giving the faculty an additional pay increase with $200,000 believed to have been held back in case of a further loss in enrollment. Since enrollment increased to a record level of 6,128 in the fall 1977, AAUP members felt the funds could be released to supplement faculty raises. The organization also voiced its opposition to a provision in the summer school contract that cancelled classes that did not have an enrollment of ten. Holmes argued, “If a faculty member obligates himself to the university in the summer, the university should obligate itself to the faculty member.”

When Acting President Fite said he knew nothing about the $200,000, members of AAUP sent a formal request to Vice President Owsley for an itemized account of the funds. Unless the report were provided, the organization threatened to call for an outside audit of the university’s accounts. A memo from Dr. Fite in late October reported that the amount of “new money” received by the university was much less than the figure Dr. Holmes had reported to the AAUP, and there was no $200,000 surplus. Vice President Owsley also pointed out that a recent audit had found no budget discrepancies. Although members of the AAUP were apparently not satisfied with the explanation, the issue was not pursued further.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} “NEOSU Receives Education Award,” \textit{Northeastern}, 1 February 1979, 1.

Any hope that enrollment would continue to increase was dashed when the registrar reported a ten percent drop between the spring of 1978 and 1977. The number of students living in campus residence halls and taking their meals in university cafeterias also declined since the fall semester. Only 883 students remained in the dorms in the spring, a loss of 83 since fall. The number of spring meal contracts fell to 722 from 841 in the fall. The continuing decline of meal contracts was reflected in a $26,000 loss in food service operations during the last six months of 1977. The sagging enrollment continued into the summer when 2,500 students registered for classes, a drop of over 300 from the summer of 1977.22

After years of increasing room and board fees, university officials and the regents apparently recognized the validity of what students had been saying for some time—higher prices drove students away. In spring 1978, the regents approved a reduction in the rate of room and board for dormitory residents. Beginning with the summer term, the cost of a dorm room with a twenty-meal plan was reduced from $152 to $149 each quarter. At the same time apartment rental increased over 11%.23

Selection of the university’s new president assumed an importance never before evidenced at Northeastern because of the financial crisis confronting the school and the turbulence that had characterized the Collier years. The regents sent members to Tahlequah in late September to seek the advice and recommendations of all elements of the university and the nearby communities it served. Before their arrival in Tahlequah, the regents had decided to involve a committee composed of one faculty member from each of the university’s seven divisions, an administrator, a staff member, one student, and a representative of the alumni association. Deadline for applications for a permanent replacement for Dr. Collier was set for December 1, and the regents announced the beginning of the fiscal year, July 1, 1978, as the date the new president would take charge of the school.

The members of the regents’ committee listened to fifteen representatives from the university and the region when they assembled in Tahlequah. These spokespersons included the mayor

of Tahlequah, area public school superintendents, civic and business representatives, and a wide spectrum of personnel from the college, including representatives of AAUP, the Northeastern chapter of the Oklahoma Education Association, the student senate, the alumni association, and various school deans and administrators. All together, the committee received more than 150 recommendations; the most frequently expressed were that the next president should be an Oklahoman and have an earned doctorate, previous experience, and plenty of common sense. After the members of the advisory committee were elected, the regents devoted considerable time and effort in defining its role.

At the close of the application period, eighty-four candidates had submitted their credentials, but only two had publically announced their candidacy—the president of Seminole Junior College and W. Roger Webb, the Oklahoma Commissioner of Public Safety. Four of the applicants were from Northeastern—Kirk Boatright, dean of the college of arts and sciences, William H. Day, professor of management, J.T. Sego, acting vice president of academic affairs, and Tracy Norwood, assistant professor of education and psychology and former head football coach. The regents assigned the advisory committee the task of winnowing the pool of applicants to twenty-five, without ranking those chosen. The reduced list contained all four of the Northeastern applicants. Members of the board then narrowed the field to ten, all of whom the Northeastern advisory panel interviewed. The Northeastern committee recommend five finalists and provided the board with written critiques of each. Boatright, the only Northeastern faculty member on the list of ten chosen by the regents, was among the five recommended by the advisory committee. Webb made the list of twenty-five and ten, but he did not appear on the list of five recommended for further consideration by the eleven-member committee from NEOSU.

The regents had reserved the right to add names to both the list of twenty-five and five and exercised that right by including the names of Webb and Dr. Joe White, president of Carl Albert Junior College, on the list of five. One of the regents voted against the motion to include the two applicants not recommended by the advisory committee, stating, “it would be a clear violation of

---

principle to consider candidates not recommended by the advisory committee.” A majority of the board disagreed, for on April 2, 1978, W. Roger Webb was named president of Northeastern Oklahoma State University by a vote of five to three.\(^{25}\)

Before Webb could be considered for the position, the regents clarified a point concerning his credentials. The commissioner of public safety did not have an Ed.D. or a Ph.D., the degrees usually considered necessary to meet the requirement for an earned doctorate, which the board of regents for Oklahoma colleges had required for the presidency of institutions under its authority since 1951.\(^{26}\) Webb’s highest degree was a juris doctorate (J.D.).

In November 1976, Elwin Fite had sent a memo to President Collier in which he listed three levels of qualification for pay for part-time faculty members. At the lowest level were instructors who held bachelor’s degrees. The intermediate level included those who had master’s degrees, Certified Public Accounts (C.P.A.s), and L.L.B. or J.D. degrees. At the highest level were individuals with earned Ed.D.s or Ph.D.s. The ranking in the memo reflected a view generally held throughout American higher education. After examining the list of twenty-five candidates, the regents (by a vote of five to two) sought the opinion of the attorney general on whether a J.D. constituted and “earned doctorate.” Later in the same meeting, the two regents who had opposed the motion seeking the attorney general’s opinion introduced a motion, which passed unanimously, that the same question be sent to the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Within five weeks the attorney general ruled that an earned J.D. constituted an earned doctorate within the meaning of the of the regents’ policy, although he added that since it was their policy, the regents could interpret it however they chose. If North Central responded to the board’s inquiry, its view was not made public.\(^{27}\) The selection of Webb provoked dissention on the Tahlequah campus, in the legislature, and within the board of regents, which had deliberated on the choice for five hours in executive session. Ed Livermore, an Edmond newspaper publisher and Webb’s most vocal advocate on the board, cited the


\(^{26}\) Minutes, Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges, 12 February 1951, 13.

administrative ability he demonstrated in his four years as commissioner of public safety as the primary reason for his selection. Leslie Fisher, superintendent of public instruction, voted against Webb because of his lack of administrative experience in education. Kenneth Nance, a Democratic member of the House of Representatives from Oklahoma City called Webb’s appointment “a breath of fresh air in the higher education system.” Representative Carl Twidwell, a Democrat from Spencer, who claimed to have known Webb “since he was knee-high to a duck,” believed he would “improve the field tremendously.” Republican Representative Charles Ford from Tulsa, however, saw the appointment as “a slap in the face at all those educators who worked years in the field hoping they someday might move up.” The Tulsa lawmaker considered the appointment a favor to a man “whose patronage job was in jeopardy.”

On the Northeastern campus most of the reaction centered around the selection process, which a member of the education department called a farce. Dr. James Walker, an associate professor of English, expressed his disappointment, pointing out, “The members of the faculty spent endless hours weighing the candidates’ qualities and abilities to deal with problems and then the Board ignores the possibilities. The issue is not Roger Webb but the process.” Rose Wood, a Tahlequah sophomore, said, “I was incredibly shocked that Mr. Webb was not on the selection committee’s top five list and that he does not have a doctorate degree.” Whatever their opinion of the selection process, most students and members of the faculty seemed willing to withhold judgment until they had seen the new president in action. Former football coach Tracy Norwood, who reflected the opinion of the segment of the faculty that had opposed the former president, claimed, “There is no way that we can’t improve over the past seven years.”

The members of the local and state AAUP were the most vocal in their opposition to the selection. The Oklahoma chapter of the organization issued a resolution expressing its concern over the disregard of the recommendations of the university selection

---


committee. The association’s newsletter claimed the selection of Webb, who had been ranked seventh by the advisory committee, and three other Oklahoma college presidents chosen in 1974-75 were influenced by political cronyism. Dismissing Governor David Boren’s denial that he had played any role in the selection of Webb, the association’s newsletter asserted, “the line-up of votes on the Board and the present political relationship of Webb to the Governor have revived all the old suspicions about cronyism.”

The election of W. Roger Webb as Northeastern’s fourteenth president and the attorney general’s opinion concerning juris doctorate degrees had ramifications far beyond the campus of Northeastern. Over the next three decades, the leadership of the state’s colleges and universities slipped from the hands of academicians with years of experience in the classroom and administration of higher education and shifted to political figures, more at home in a statehouse than a college campus. By the time Northeastern celebrated its centennial, the chancellor of higher education in Oklahoma and the presidents of its two flagship universities were attorneys.

In the three months before Webb assumed the presidency, academic life on the Northeastern campus continued its familiar routine, little affected by the selection of the new president, visitation hours in the dorms, bonded indebtedness, and other issues aired in the press. Morale, a perpetual issue in most organizations, was evaluated in the campus newspaper with no conclusions reached, except perhaps that it, like beauty, was in the eye of the beholder. The editor of the student paper, in February, had reviewed the school’s problems and proclaimed a “crisis in student morale.” A former student who had initially enrolled at NSC in 1965 wrote the editor pointing out the improvements in conditions for students since his college days. After his election as president of the faculty council, Dr. Donald Herrlein, professor of guidance and counseling, suggested, “Right now, faculty morale is the lowest I’ve seen since I came here 13 years ago.” A week later, in reviewing his year as acting president, Dr. Fite observed that the low turnover in staff “reflects on the high level of morale.”

30 NEOSU Faculty Publication Claims Political Cronyism,” Tahlequah Pictorial Press and Star-Citizen, 8 May 1978, 1.
faculty continued going to class and fulfilling their obligations, paying scant attention to the controversies that swirled around them.

The familiar routine of at least one group on campus was upset during the spring semester of 1978. The members of Sigma Tau Gamma, the only fraternity with an off-campus house, sold their home at 224 West Delaware to the city of Tahlequah. The historic Stapler home, which had housed the fraternity since 1969, had become increasingly costly to maintain, and the members of the chapter hoped to build a modern, new house. The city removed the building and turned the site into a parking lot.32

In summarizing the accomplishments of the school while he was acting president, Dr. Fite mentioned a year of achievement and some new directions.33 Perhaps, his greatest achievement was to calm the turbulence that characterized the Collier years. Most of the problems remained, but they appeared less divisive under Fite. Many residents of the dormitories considered the new direction in housing policy a return to a more restrictive past, but Fite’s firm stand and willingness to make some concessions won grudging tolerance. Students remained unhappy about housing rules when Fite’s successor arrived, but he did not face an immediate student rebellion. A more accurate description of the 1977-78 academic year might have been as a transitional period following a decade of confrontation and preceding an era of stability and growth in which marked progress was made in reversing the negative image of Northeastern that had developed during the final days of the Garrison administration and the entire Collier era.

During the final three months of the Fite interregnum, the president-elect was frequently on the Northeastern campus. Unlike President Collier, who had been criticized for seldom leaving his office, Roger Webb seemed ubiquitous. From the Sixth Annual Indian Symposium, which opened days after his selection in early April to a political fund raising dinner in late June at the University Center for Governor Boren who was seeking the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate, Webb seemed omnipresent, conferring with students and faculty as much as with university administrators. He even accepted an invitation to attend a picnic of

---


the Northeastern chapter of the AAUP, the organization that had been most critical of his selection. In an extended interview with students from the *Northeastern*, he stressed that he would be accessible to all members of the Northeastern community and willing to consider their concerns, but he was careful to avoid committing himself to specific courses of action until he became familiar with the school, its policies, and problems. After talking to Webb, a candidate for the presidency of the student senate observed, “he will be very receptive to student input.”34