

# EASTFIELD: THE PERSON-CENTERED COLLEGE

*“The presentness of the past”*

T. S. Eliot

*A green awning shades the casket, the newly-dug grave, and the mourners surrounding it as they pay their last respects to a member of the Motley family, a pioneer family of the North Texas prairie. The graveside ceremony is not taking place at a “memorial park” or even at a rural cemetery, but at a private family cemetery dating back to antebellum times. The earliest tombstone here is that of Penelope Motley McLain, dated 1863. Other graves, those of the slaves the Motleys brought with them from Kentucky and those they freed, are unmarked but are part of the family cemetery. Since 1976, the cemetery has borne the mark of a Texas historic site, but members of the Motley family continue to use it as generations have before them as a private burial ground. Such private cemeteries, usually attached to large farms or ranches, dot the rural Texas landscape, especially in far West Texas where life was short and distances long. What is remarkable about the Motley cemetery is that it sits on a corner of the campus of a thriving community college serving more than 9,000 students. The past is literally always present at Eastfield College.*

The Motley cemetery serves as a constant reminder of the earliest settlers from other states in what is now Eastfield’s service area. The College was built on land once owned by the Motley family, replacing the recently-burned Motley homestead. According to Dr. Jerry Henson’s The Person-Centered College: Reminiscences of the First Thirty Years at Eastfield College, the Motley family owned thousands of acres in east Dallas County,

including land now occupied by a shopping mall and housing developments. The change from the large tract of farm land owned by the Motleys before the Civil War until the mid-twentieth century to a burgeoning suburban landscape coincides with the general movement in the state from being predominantly rural to being predominantly urban during the same era. This socio-economic shift in the state spawned the growth of the community college movement in general in the 1960's-70's and the need for a college in east Dallas County in particular.

Opening in Fall 1970 with 3,522 students, Eastfield welcomed a student population with apparent ethnic and cultural ties to the descendents of the original settlers in the area and to newer residents who sought a community with such ties. Dr. Henson recounts that only 79% of the students reported their ethnicity that opening semester. Of those who did, 76% reported being Caucasian, 1% "Negro," 2% "Latin American." Four students reported themselves as "Oriental" and 11 as "American Indian." Ten years later the minority enrollment had risen to 25.7%.

A comparable report of the ethnic group percentages of the credit enrollment at Eastfield (this time with 99.9% of students reporting) follows: Hispanic 17.7%; Caucasian, 53.3%; African American, 20.7%; Native American, 0.7%; Asian, Pacific Islander, 5.7%; Other, 1.8%. A series of graphs and charts comparing the ethnic representation of the credit enrollment at Eastfield with that of the service area and the implications to be drawn from these comparisons is found in the Appendix to this study.

The first class was comprised of more male students (65%) than of female students (35%). Spring 2001 registration figures show that the ratio has become more evenly distributed, with 59% males and 41% females.

Other demographic data from the recently released 2000 census fills in the picture of the communities that replaced the Motley farm and the other farms that once dominated Eastfield's service area. As a whole, the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex is growing both in

area and in population. Several suburban cities that were sleepy small towns a few years ago are experiencing double-digit growth, most of which is coming from newcomers from other states who have at least a baccalaureate degree. The two suburbs in Eastfield's service area are not among them: both Garland and Mesquite reported single-digit growth. The Dallas Morning News (May 26, 2002) lists Garland as one of the top ten cities in the North Texas area with residents who do not speak English at home. The newspaper (May 27, 2002) also lists one of the communities in the Eastfield service area (Balch Springs) among the cities with the lowest percentage of residents 25 and older who had at least a bachelor's degree. Balch Springs is also listed among the cities with the highest percentage of residents 25 and older who did not earn a high school diploma or a GED. All the newspaper's lists are based on 2000 census data.

Within its primary service area, Eastfield counts several developments with prosperous and well-educated citizens. Sunnyvale, a community of small ranches and "ranchettes" bordering Mesquite, has the highest per capita income in the service area. ZIP codes in both Mesquite and Garland, the two major suburban cities served by the College, cover areas with per capita incomes above the Dallas County average. Neither of these two suburban cities is listed by The Dallas Morning News among the ten North Texas cities with the highest or lowest percentage of residents 25 and older who hold at least a bachelor's degree.

The history and current make-up of Eastfield's service area, then, reflects the past and present history and socio-economic trends of the state and the county. Since its founding, the College has made the changes necessary to adjust to these trends in its policies, procedures, pedagogy, and programs. But one part of Eastfield has not changed whatever the changes in the surrounding service area: the College's commitment to its "person-centered" philosophy. Dr. Henson's book details the first articulation of the philosophy by Dr. R. Jan LeCroy, first President of Eastfield and later Chancellor of the Dallas County Community College District, and of its use in the hiring process of the original faculty, administration, and staff. Despite the changing demographics of the service area

and of the College itself, the tradition of the “person-centered college” remains. That the original idea still has a living presence on the campus is perhaps best demonstrated by its use (it is quoted in its entirety) as documentation for a **must** statement regarding “learning environment” in 4.2.4.

Eastfield’s current President, Dr. Rodger Pool reaffirmed the concept of the “person-centered college,” giving the concept additional moral depth in his first convocation speech. His vision for the College was published as “Enduring Values of Eastfield College”:

*In order that Eastfield College may be a vital community of learning, the members of the Eastfield College family should:*

- 1. Strive to make Eastfield College an educationally purposeful community; a place where all members work together to strengthen learning and teaching.*
- 2. Strive to make Eastfield College a disciplined and accountable community; a place where individual members of the community accept their obligations to the other members of the community and where clear understandings guide behavior for the common good.*
- 3. Strive to make Eastfield College a caring community; a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.*
- 4. Strive to make Eastfield College an open community; a place where each person has a right to engage in responsible self-expression and where civility is powerfully affirmed.*
- 5. Strive to make Eastfield College a just community; a place where the sacredness of each person is recognized and where the value of diversity is appreciated.*

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” poet and literary critic T. S. Eliot discusses what he calls the “presentness of the past” in literature. By this he means that all writers must necessarily write within a literary tradition and that when young writers begin to write, the whole, centuries-old tradition, the “past” of literature is present with them. In the same way, colleges have a sense of the “presentness of the past,” a tradition that goes deeper than the ivy that hangs from the hallowed halls or the bonfire before the big game. The “presentness of the past” that most evokes the spirit of a college lies in the relationships within and among the members of the college community. For Eastfield, from its earliest days, even before there was a physical campus, the ideal of the “person-centered college” was planted as the overarching tradition. Dr. Pool’s new vision demonstrates “the presentness of the past” in the continuity of emphasis on the “sacredness” and worth of the individual.

This Self-Study Report, of course, deals with the present. In the pages that follow, readers will find an assessment of the systems, policies, procedures, and practices by which the College attempts to fulfill its goals. But throughout the document readers will also find references to the “person-centered college” and evidence of the efforts of the administration, faculty, and staff to continue that tradition, to keep that part of the past in the present. The Self-Study Director, the Editor of the Report, the Steering Committee members, and the Sub-Committee chairs and members invite readers who wish to know more about Eastfield’s present to read on.