

A Scholarly Endeavor

BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI

The year was 1963. The University of Oklahoma had recruitment and enrichment programs for gifted athletes and student leaders. It was past time to go after the academic elite.



National Achievement Award Scholars came under Steve Sutherland's guidance in 1985.

By the time classes at the University of Oklahoma were in full swing in autumn 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. had delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the nuclear test ban treaty had been implemented, the Beatles' inaugural album had topped American music charts and the Pro Football Hall of Fame had opened. The first artificial heart had been implanted into a human, cassette tapes had just been introduced and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* had become best-sellers.

To paraphrase '60s icon Bob Dylan, the times, they were a changin'.

Amidst this cultural and social transformation—and to some extent because of it—OU leaders launched a new initiative to celebrate and nurture academic excellence: the University Scholars Program.

The previous year, President George Lynn Cross and Assistant to the President David A. Burr founded the President's Leadership Class, an exclusive program for members of the freshman class who exhibited strong leadership skills in high school. PLC began the University's tradition of recognizing high-achieving and highly visible members of the freshman class. The Scholars Program was created to acknowledge students selected on the basis of extraordinary scholarship.

With University College Dean Glenn Couch at the helm and Assistant Dean J.R. Morris at his side, the first class of 47 University Scholars was welcomed in fall 1963.

"There was a shift in thinking in the United States after the [former] Soviet Union launched its Sputnik program, [a series of unmanned space missions in the late 1950s aimed at demonstrating the viability of artificial satellites]," explains Morris,



Robert Taylor

When J. R. Morris, right, succeeded Glenn Couch as dean of University College in 1966, he selected Assistant Dean Steve Sutherland, left, to head the fledgling University Scholars program, an association that lasted until Sutherland's retirement in 1992.

provost and professor emeritus who also served twice as OU's interim president. "Up to that point, the emphasis among college students was to be 'regular guys' rather than eggheads, who were seen in a negative light. As we moved into the 1960s, high academic achievement among students became a top goal for universities. We wanted to celebrate scholarship."

The objective of the program, now known as the OU Scholars Program, was to recruit intellectually gifted students from across Oklahoma. Once they arrived on campus, they would receive individual and group mentoring and advising, as well as exposure to broad, life-enriching experiences. *continued*

The complementary blend made the fledgling program unique and, in many ways, unconventional.

"Glenn liked to describe it as an effort to free talented students from a lockstep curriculum, allowing them to move at their own pace and avoid redundancy in their courses," Morris remembers. "He encouraged students to be daring, to test their limits. He promised them they had no limits except their own imaginations. He never failed to give his approval to any daring academic scheme a Scholar brought to him."

Those schemes included carrying up to 24 hours a semester, taking graduate seminars or landing plum laboratory research assignments. To say that those opportunities were atypical for freshmen is an understatement. But the Scholars were certainly up to the task. Seventeen members of the first class of 47 graduated in three years.

Morris and Couch met weekly with the Scholars as a group and invited a different faculty member to join them so they, too, could become acquainted with the students. "Glenn wanted everyone on campus to realize that Scholars were very special people," says Morris.

Without Couch's passion and commitment, Morris empha-

sizes, there probably would not have been a Scholars Program. "Those who knew and remember him are fortunate. He was an extraordinary man."

After Couch's untimely death in 1966, Morris was named University College dean and tapped Assistant Dean Steve Sutherland to lead the Scholars Program.

Morris and Sutherland built on Couch's programming idea by continuing to introduce Scholars to distinguished OU faculty and also familiarizing them with such campus gems as the Everette L. DeGolyer Collection (now known as the History of Science Collections) and Western History Collections.

While selection as a University Scholar was prestigious, there was no available financial support for tuition and expenses. There were, however, certain privileges: graduate-student-level library cards, no-cost advanced standing testing (rarely used before being popularized through the Scholars Program, Morris notes), first choice for honors courses, free notebooks from the bookstore and a specially designed University Scholar ring.

Sutherland, who as both assistant dean of University College and assistant vice president for Student Affairs headed the Scholars Program until his retirement in 1992, still wears his



Photo provided

In 1979, the R. Boyd Gunning Scholarships, sponsored by the OU Foundation, were added to the list of awards attracting the state's academic elite to the University of Oklahoma. A group from the inaugural top 10 freshman recipients is shown here with then-OU President Paul F. Sharp, far right. From left are Alicia Houser, Billie Winter, Dana Brooks and Greg Lynn.



National Achievement Award Scholars Lisa Morris, left, and Lamont Jones, right, were among the attendees at the reunion of OU Scholars held last spring to honor their mentor, Steve Sutherland, center, with the announcement of a scholarship fund in his name.

ring. "It's one of only three remaining that were given to non-students," he explains. "The others belong to J.R. and [current OU Regents' Professor and former associate provost and University College dean] Jerry Weber."

Gradually, university scholarship money became available and by the end of the 1960s, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education provided enough additional financial support to enable OU to launch its National Scholars Program.

"Before that time, we simply didn't have the financial resources to recruit nationally. The State Regents really made it happen," Morris recalls. "Recruitment for bright students became as intense as recruitment for athletes."

That first group of 47 students has grown exponentially. Although final numbers are not

yet in, Senior Vice President and Provost Nancy Mergler estimates some 900 to 1,000 students—25 to 30 percent of the entire 2007 freshman class—will be National or OU Scholars.

Forty-four years after its humble beginning, the OU Scholars Program is the largest source of academic scholarships for direct-from-high school freshmen. Qualified applicants are awarded one of five levels of scholarships in the form of tuition waivers: the four-year renewable Regents Scholar, Award of Excellence, Honors Scholar and Valedictorian Scholar, plus the one that started it all—the one-year non-renewable University Scholar.

Sutherland still marvels at the memories of the thousands of his "kids," as he still calls them, he recruited and advised. "Every one of them was different. Some knew all the hurdles that faced them and had a plan for overcoming them. Others knew they could do most anything but didn't have the slightest idea what they wanted to do. But they all had this in common: They felt they had a lot at stake and didn't want to screw up," he explains. "My job was to protect that for them, while at the same time encourage them to take fun courses, expose them to very broad experiences and use all available resources to enable them to do anything once they got settled into college life."

The connection between adviser and student is a special and enduring one. Just how special was obvious on an evening in May 2007.

Months earlier Sutherland, a self-avowed pack rat, began sorting through dozens of boxes of memorabilia he had stored in



Robert Taylor

The first University Scholars received no financial aid, just special programming and a treasured ring that Steve Sutherland and J.R. Morris still wear.

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THE STEPHEN M. SUTHERLAND Scholarship Fund

May 2, 2007

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Each year Sutherland recognized OU Scholars with a unique t-shirt and poster design for their class. Tables turned in 2007, when the OU Development office created a poster commemorating the scholarship fund honoring Sutherland.

his garage. Among the reams of documents he collected during his years at OU were lists of more than 2,000 names of Scholars he recruited and mentored over nearly 30 years. No addresses, phone numbers or other identifying information. Just names.

He asked Matt Hamilton, OU's registrar and associate vice president for Enrollment and Student Financial Services (and a former Scholar himself), and Karen Baker Renfroe, Regional Director of Major Gifts, whether they might be interested in the lists.

They were, of course. The three spent hours together, as Sutherland reminisced about his "kids," and it hit them: What if former Scholars together created an endowment to support scholarships for future academically outstanding students?

After the names were coded into OU's alumni database, Hamilton and Renfroe asked Sutherland to invite 100 former Scholars he knew personally to become founding donors of the campaign and help kick it off with a dinner event on campus.

Hamilton and Renfroe held back one small detail: The scholarship was to be named the Stephen M. Sutherland Scholarship Fund.

Allan Keown, deputy legal counsel for the California Department of Education, was among those who came from near and far to honor their mentor and friend. "Could I have been anywhere else? Honoring Steve's contribution to me, as well as to the thousands of other young people at OU throughout his career, was not only a distinct honor and privilege but more in the realm of a moral imperative," Keown says. "His genuine concern for those of us he 'took in' was a gift that continues to give."

Bartlesville native Dana Brooks Bourland, a member of 1979's inaugural group of R. Boyd Gunning Scholars (10 students with the best ACT scores and GPAs in the state), says she, too, had no intention of passing up the opportunity to honor Sutherland and the program.

Now senior merger and acquisition counsel for Wichita, Kansas-based Koch Industries, Bourland says Sutherland is the reason she attended OU.

Not yet 17 when she graduated from high school, she had no intention of staying in state and no desire to go to a state school. "I had 'bigger plans' but my parents weren't particularly keen about sending me off to a college too far away."

Sutherland, who knew of every potential Scholar in the state, contacted Bourland through her high school counselor and invited her and her parents to visit OU. "I'd never been on the campus. He spent several hours that day showing us around and talking to me about professors I should take as if I were already enrolled. By the end of the afternoon, I was enrolled for the fall semester with a schedule pretty much hand-picked by Dr. Sutherland, had a student ID, knew which dorm I should select as my top choice and was signed up for sorority rush."

His constant availability and valuable guidance continued through her college years. "He always made me feel that I had his undivided attention, regardless of how small the issue I brought to him. I think each of us [Scholars] thought we were special and capable of great things because he instilled in us a sense that he believed in us," Bourland recalls. "Being a Scholar reinforced my confidence that whatever I set my mind to accomplish was possible as long as I was willing to work hard, share the credit and take responsibility for my own actions."

Bourland, Keown and their fellow OU Scholars likely would enthusiastically confirm the contents of a sign displayed prominently on the walls of the program's office in David L. Boren Hall: "The mission of the OU Scholars Program is to empower our students to be effective and successful during their first year at the University of Oklahoma in a way that leaves both them and us touched, moved and inspired."

It has, it does and it will.

For information about the Stephen M. Sutherland Scholarship Fund, contact Karen Renfroe at krenfroe@ou.edu.

Debra Levy Martinelli, '00 journ, writes freelance articles for Sooner Magazine.