

Reflections of James A. Breaux

Few phases of my life – personal, business, family or social – fail to recall influences of my nearly life-long association with Louisiana State University.

As a youngster raised with a Depression-era and World War II background, I had a limited perspective of college, but that view always focused on LSU. Encouragement by my brother, whose college education was cut short by economic necessity in the Depression years, and my brother-in-law, who was completing college on the GI Bill, resulted in my accepting no option other than a college education – and I was determined to get it at the state university in Baton Rouge.

My first year – in 1952 – saw me concentrating on my desire to go into journalism, based on working three years at the Bogalusa Daily Enterprise. As a freshman, I reported and proofread for the Daily Reveille, later serving as news editor in my sophomore year. Looking back, that freshman year was one resulting in considerable maturity for a small-town 18-year-old with limited exposure to the world. Associating with 10,000(!)

students, including mature World War II veterans, many of them married and with young families (remember the temporary Nicholson barracks?), exposed me to individuals with higher ambition.

My decision to change my major to Chemical Engineering was influenced by many sources in addition to my family. Interestingly, the Gaylord Container paper mill at Bogalusa had a large number of LSU chemical engineers whom I knew and admired. These included Jay Goss, Junius Sapp, Cooper Ratliff, John Dyer, L.L. Smith, Art Reed and Dalton Pollet – all of whom I admired for their lifestyle and reputation in our community.

I had a tough transition in my sophomore year, making up calculus and physics while being exposed to the entry-level Chem E courses and the tough regimen of the chemical engineering faculty. Dr. Horton and Dr. Coates, who had been closely associated with my Bogalusa predecessors, were sympathetic to the workload resulting in my change in major,

while I also held a job on the campus newspaper. Dr. Pressburg and Dr. Keller, while less sympathetic, made sure I recognized the need for perseverance in my studies (even though I had regular Saturday schedule for marching off ROTC demerits).

Our class of 1956 was small by today's standards – less than 25, as I recall. Their level of competence and competitiveness challenged me to raise my level of expectations to new heights. Although I've been unable to maintain contact with many classmates over the years, I greatly value my association during those years with such individuals as Clarence Eidt, Sam Bergeron, Wylie Hogeman, Tommy Howard, Gary Dupre and the late Whitney Paul Breaux (no relation).

Graduation found me again thrust into a new world. Papermaking then, and to a considerable lesser degree today, was considered more art than science, heavily influenced by practical experience. Engineering and scientific applications were beginning to be merged with the knowledge of the practical papermaker, and my interest early on focused on production supervision and management, with efforts to accelerate the interfacing of these two valuable fields.

In the industry in which I've chosen to spend my career, I've found a need to prove one's self as a specialist in a specific area before one can move on to success as a generalist.

Change in technology in the last four or five decades has been kaleidoscopic and has been particularly acute in the engineering field. Splintering of our profession into complex specialties has left a patchwork of non-intersecting, non-communicating branches of knowledge. There's a great need in this world for generalists to bring together these specialists – these experts with specific know-how. A generalist must organize and coordinate the efforts of people having widely varying expertise – developing logical solutions to problems at hand. An orchestra needs a conductor. The maestro, while not

expected to be a virtuoso on each instrument, must understand how each component contributes to the whole performance.

The training and approach to problem-solving instilled in me by the LSU chemical engineering faculty has been invaluable in helping me as I moved toward my of becoming a generalist. Breaking down a problem into its smaller components, application of unit processes and operations, utilizing available resources, calling on knowledge available from associates – all these were taught by Drs. Horton, Coates, and associates before any of us heard of Daming's 14 principles or Kepner-Tregoe problem-solving techniques or even recognized the word "paradigm." (I was astonished to find my engineering education was helpful in understanding a balance sheet and a profit and loss statement!)

In the five decades of my exposure to industry (from the 1950's to the 1990's) I've seen a plethora of "alphabet soup" management techniques – MBO, SQC, SPC, TQM, etc. – some short-lived, some more successful than others in that search for "the magic bullet." In all cases, I've been able to call on the well-grounded educational background I received at LSU, reinforced by the philosophy of the Department of Chemical Engineering faculty, in coping with the changing challenges facing management in today's environment.

More than 40 classes have moved through the university that I entered in the early fifties – educating individuals no doubt better prepared than I to benefit from a system that has shown continual improvement over that time frame. My involvement with Dean McLaughlin's Advisory Board over the past several years has given me confidence that current and future engineering students at LSU – while living in an entirely different world than the 1950's – are being provided similar opportunities that this fortunate and thankful student benefitted from and enjoyed.