

## Interview with Steven Thompson

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Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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Pogue: My name is Phil Pogue. We’re on the campus of Rock Valley Community College in Rockford, Illinois. It is July the 18, 2013. This is the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library project on Illinois’ community colleges and their development. We have with us Steve Thompson, who’s going to be talking to us about the history of Rock Valley. We want to thank him for participating in our project and explaining, in this interview, the history at Rock Valley.

Steve, to begin with, could you give us your educational background and family background?

Thompson: Okay. I’ll tell you that I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, lived in Woodridge, Illinois, from the time I was six years old. [I was] originally born in Connecticut, but we moved to Illinois in 1963. I attended Downers Grove South High School. I will share that I was a son of two librarians, a college librarian and a special librarian. It was a few years into graduate school before I decided that library work was close to my strengths. So, I will say that I am a librarian by birth, in a way.



*Steven Thompson, archivist  
Rock Valley College.*

I went to the Downers Grove South High School and graduated and then attended, for two years, MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois. Then I graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. I majored in urban studies and graduated in 1978. After graduating, I explored the field of social work for a bit, but finally ended up with a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in library and information studies, and I graduated in 1983.

Pogue: What is your present involvement at Rock Valley, and have you had any other community college experiences?

Thompson: Currently, and since 2002, I am an outreach librarian and archivist at the Estelle M. Black Library. I did have experience at the very beginning of my library career in working in the center system of the University of Wisconsin. The campus I worked at was the Barron County Campus in Rice Lake, Wisconsin. That is one of thirteen two-year campuses of the University of Wisconsin Center System.<sup>1</sup>

Pogue: Now, this was early in your career. Is there a difference between the Wisconsin system and the Illinois system that you observed?

Thompson: It's a significant difference in terms of technical colleges and two-year arts and sciences programs, which is characteristic of the University of Wisconsin Center System. The interesting component of that setup in Rice Lake was that, at the same time that there was the two-year campus, there was a little bit of a brisk walk across [campus], and I would be able to visit the WITI, Wisconsin Indian Technical Institute. They were on the same physical location in 1984, but they didn't necessarily have a lot of contact with each other.

I found, in other systems around the country, that the idea of a comprehensive community college, which is true of Illinois, that couldn't be the description in the Wisconsin system, with the separate technical institutes, such as Blackhawk [Technical College, Janesville, WI] and then University of Wisconsin Rock County, [Janesville, WI], which would be just to our north, since we're in the state line area. It was possibly a different introduction to community colleges than I was used to, because again, I knew the College of DuPage in DuPage County, where I grew up.

Pogue: What have been your major responsibilities in your position here at Rock Valley?

Thompson: I provide reference assistance; I offer classroom instruction in the use of the library; I work to develop the library collection as a liaison to five academic areas. One of the parts that gives strength to our library is the Friends of Estelle M. Black Library. I'm the staff liaison and was very much involved

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Wisconsin System is made up of 13 four-year universities, 13 freshman-sophomore UW Colleges campuses, and statewide UW-Extension.

from the beginning of that organization. It began in 2005. In addition to those responsibilities, I serve as the college archivist.

Pogue: Who was Estelle Black?

Thompson: I had the privilege of working for Estelle Black. That was part of my career prior to Rock Valley. I was an outreach librarian at Rockford Public Library. Estelle M. Black is an African-American administrator who worked at Rockford Public Library for many, many years of her career. She is also an initial employee in the library of Rock Valley College. So it's a fascinating connection, not only to have worked for Estelle Black, but also to see pictures of her in the very first process of the library.



*Estelle Black*

She worked as a acquisitions assistant at that time, typist, clerk-typist. She worked in 1965 for about a year, until '66, acquiring the books that were to become part of the initial collection of the library. After she left, she became a professional librarian, having graduated from the University of Wisconsin. So there's a very special connection of the name to the library

Pogue: How did Rock Valley begin in 1964?

Thompson: The voters approved the establishment of—at that time it was known as Winnebago-Boone Junior College—by a referenda vote on October 10, 1964. The rules at that time were that a “yes” vote was needed from the incorporated areas and the unincorporated areas. Voters in the incorporated areas, Rockford in particular, voted against establishing the college, while the favorable votes from the unincorporated areas—which included Rockton and Roscoe—were responsible for tipping the outcome of the referenda toward approval of Winnebago-Boone Junior College.

Shortly thereafter, actually November 28, 1964, an election was held in which voters elected seven to be on the board of trustees, but they had a field of sixty-eight candidates who were interested in running for those positions. During the first half of 1965, the board of trustees hired its president, dean of instruction and business manager.

Well, when classes were scheduled to begin, there was no campus at that time, so a variety of buildings were used to accommodate the classes. Those included, in Rockford, the Naval Reserve Armory, the National Guard Armory, the YWCA and Harlem High School in Loves Park, which is just to the north of Rockford.

Classes began on September 29, 1965. There was an enrollment of 1,064 students. Actually, for some who are familiar with college terms, the first half-dozen years, Rock Valley College classes met on the quarter system. So, if you think about September 29, 1965, the first quarter would have ended close to the end of December and then the second quarter, January through March, and then the third quarter would go April into June. That was their schedule. Later, of course, it went to the semesters of the fall and the spring and then summer term.

The classes at that time, 1965, there were twenty programs that included seven career programs and thirteen for transfer for obtaining a four-year degree. The career courses offered the first year were mechanical design technology and drafting design. Then by the second year, the college acquired a 217-acre farm and began a building plan that included remodeling of the farm buildings and rapid construction of four frame buildings. I'll actually be talking about that a little later in the interview, I believe.

The second year, it was more than double; 2,400 students were served. There were more occupational programs that were developed in rented facilities that included a former Catholic girls' residential school, a few miles from the new campus. Then aviation maintenance and automobile maintenance, just a few years later, used rented facilities at the Rockford airport, and then automotive met in Belvidere.

Pogue: Did the Illinois Community College Act of 1965 lead to any changes at Rock Valley? And did any later legislation impact the college?

Thompson: I would say that probably the later legislation didn't impact the college, but the Illinois Community College Act of 1965 did lead to some changes at Rock Valley. I am thankful for Gerald Smith's review of thirty-five years of community college history. Some of the information I gained from that. But I would say that among the four Illinois community colleges, which were established before this Act, there were four.

One was Rock Valley. Rock Valley was established by Illinois legislation that was passed in 1959. It established area junior college districts throughout Illinois. Consequently, Rock Valley College's district was mapped as part of the master plan of the Board of Higher Education between 1962 and 1964. The provisions within the Illinois Community College Act of 1965 designated colleges that originated when Rock Valley did, which is 1964, as Class II Institutions.

Since the 1965 legislation also established the Illinois Junior College Board, Rock Valley College was recognized first by the Department of Public Instruction and then by the Illinois... Could we stop? (pause in recording) Then I should say, the 1965 legislation established the Illinois Junior College Board, and it was a transition time, because Rock Valley had been established

in 1964. But very shortly thereafter, the Act was passed, 1965, the Illinois Community College Act, and we were probably part of the common school districts. So, the Department of Public Instruction recognized us as a college, but then shortly thereafter we were recognized by the Illinois Junior College Board. The original charter document was signed July 14, 1965, by Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ray Page, and I have a copy of that. It's a very pretty document; it's typed in blue script, and it has a wonderful logo from the Department of Public Instruction.

But we were able to, as a college, apply to be a Class I Institution. It didn't require holding another board election or changing the existing organization of the college. The Illinois Junior College Board received our application to become a Class I Institution and then granted recognition status to that effect April 16, 1966. Really, the legislation that we were established under was possibly closer to funding in the common school districts, so the funding was insufficient.

The property tax revenue for Rock Valley College was based on an eight mill levy.<sup>2</sup> Our president at that time, Dr. Karl Jacobs, said the original levy was formulated, based on the K-14 [kindergarten through grade 14] school system. He said that this funding model did not account for the economies of scale that would occur for a district which also served grades nine through twelve. It was a big problem, and the operating costs far exceeded the revenues when the time to move occurred, into our permanent facilities.

Pogue: Have the district boundaries changed since 1964?

Thompson: As a Boone and Winnebago Junior College, by name, two counties were included. And so, yes, the boundaries have changed. When the college was established, nine high school districts were part of the original district. The expansion of the district occurred in the southwestern direction, and it eventually brought in three school districts in Ogle County. Those were Byron—and I'm speaking of high school districts—Stillman Valley and a portion of the Oregon Unified District. With these three additions, the total number of public high school districts served is twelve, representing sixteen public high schools.

Pogue: What have been the major challenges in serving such a large geographic area?

Thompson: Proximity really is an important part. Just practically speaking, if one were to travel from Caledonia or Poplar Grove in Boone County to the campus that we've established on our major Highway 20, it would take about twenty-five minutes. The proximity of the course offerings, and any offerings to residents that are dispersed, is probably one of the key issues.

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<sup>2</sup> One mill is one dollar per \$1,000 dollars of assessed value.

One thing that helped was to provide access to the credit offerings at company sites in the 1970s and 1980s. For a period of time, since Boone County's the site of a Chrysler assembly plant—at that time, it was actually established about the same time as Rock Valley, in 1965—we did some training with Chrysler workers into the '90s and continue today.

But numerous grant programs in the health and governmental services were offered, and they were given at community sites. Our continuing education offerings sites were located and dispersed throughout, most likely at high schools. During the course of development, it was necessary in the late '90s and early 2000 to invest in developing additional campus centers.

We developed one that is known as Stenstrom Center, which is located on the south side of Rockford, close to U.S. Highways 20 and 251. In addition, there was the Learning Opportunities Center, which was located and established in downtown Rockford within the last three years, and Employment Services, which is part of the Workforce Investment Board, was first located in downtown Rockford. Then it moved to South 11th Street in Rockford, then back downtown on North Main Street. So there have been several efforts to disperse and provide centers that provide additional access to the Rock Valley College offerings.

I should mention, too, that other buildings that were included include a building the college owned at East Rock Industrial Park, where there was automotive and adult education programs. In the earliest part of the college's history, we assumed apprenticeship training programs, and we located those at the City Yards in Rockford on Creston Street. Two other facilities that I've mentioned, but I'll mention again, is that automotive in the '70s and even '60s was located in Belvidere, and we've always had aviation maintenance, from 1968 until the present, at [Chicago] Rockford [International] Airport. Currently it's at the Falcon Road Hangar. Those are some parts of challenges of developing facilities in conjunction with the geographic area.

Pogue: You talked about your Career Education Center; where did the Stenstrom name come in?

Thompson: Oh, okay. The Stenstrom family was instrumental in providing a substantial amount of money for redevelopment of the Stenstrom Center, or it was known as the Career Education Center. It was owned by the Rockford School District but was purchased by the college in about 1999 for \$200,000. As part of the college's plan into the early 2000s, it needed extensive renovation, including new roofs and new heating and ventilation. Well, with the gift from the Stenstrom family, it really was [a] much better facility. So, that name reflects the Stenstrom Construction Company, which is a major... They develop gas stations and road construction are part of the services that are provided by Stenstrom.

Pogue: What partnerships have existed?

Thompson: The partnerships that I should mention include those with high schools and the Career Education Associates of North Central Illinois (CEANCI). CEANCI is the vocational arm of the Winnebago and Boone County Regional Office of Education. CEANCI and Rock Valley partnered for dozens of years. During the 1990s the college coordinated Tech Prep, which was funded federally as a part of the School to Work Act of 1964. Numerous high schools, including the Rockford School District 205, Harlem District, Belvidere and Hononegah Districts participated.

While it was many years later, Advance Now is an expanded initiative that is a partnership that came out of CEANCI. It contains the elements of the Tech Prep, but now it's added dual credit. Partnerships with the school district have included the dual credit program, which is known as Running Start. That includes Byron and Stillman Valley School Districts in Ogle County, Belvidere in Boone County, Harlem, Rockford, Hononegah Districts and even South Beloit in Winnebago County. There are countless number of students that participate. I don't have figures on it, but it has been a very successful and sought after program by the schools.

Interestingly enough, those partnerships that involve high schools are also things that are very basic to bringing students to Rock Valley in the first place, including the Science Olympiad, the math contest [the Regional Mathematics Contest], Rock Valley College Jazz Festival, which involves area high school jazz bands coming for a clinic, and they are all gathering together. And then one more recent endeavor is to be part of the Alignment Rockford High School Pathways Committee, which is a way in which students see their career path, and the community comes behind it and tries to encourage, in all ways, students to continue in school.

Pogue: What have been some of the major events in the history of Rock Valley?

Thompson: There have been some themes that have been described in these events. So I've broken them down to some themes, as far as time periods. The period 1964 to 1969 was the college establishing its groundwork and beginning its mission. You've heard about the establishment of the college, but you may want to know then that, during that time period, that the presidents that served included Clifford Erickson, so he began in April, 1965. The next president during this period was Dr. Karl Jacobs, a president who arrived from Flint, Michigan, and he began as president January, 1969. Of note is that Governor Richard Ogilvie delivered the inaugural address for Dr. Karl Jacobs' installation on October 12, 1969.

Moving into the 1970s, many successes were experienced. The Starlight Summer Theatre was developed; it continues today. There was a training of youth in an outreach program through the Leola Arnold Memorial

School. Buildings were dedicated on November 23, 1970. That would be five buildings through the Capital Development Board. In 1971, Rock Valley became responsible for adult and continuing education that was formerly under the Rockford School District. I mentioned that the apprenticeship training program became part of the site known as the City Yards. That began in fall of 1972. That was the site for many of the pre-employment skills and health opportunities grant programs.

The most notable for the support of the college and sustainability was that in December of 1972, the college, after two failed referenda... One construction referendum passed in 1966, but two failed until December, 1972. This referendum added seven cents to the mill levy, and it was just a very strong support that the community was behind Rock Valley College.

There was no venue really for concerts in the Rockford area, so the Physical Education Center became a venue for community lectures and concert series. There were performers that included the Carpenters, the Stan Kenton Orchestra, band leader Doc Severinsen, groups like that that came through. Then there were also theater productions that came through, "Jesus Christ Superstar." Also, there were open campus days that provided tours and sample classes for district residents. That completes the 1970s.

Then into the 1980s, it is actually a very strong part of Rockford's industrial economy that in 1980, the unemployment rate in Rockford was the highest in the nation. So, in 1982, the community colleges in Illinois initiated the Displaced Worker Program, and Rock Valley was a participant in that program. That's when it initiated.

Interestingly enough, I mentioned that in September, 1966, the enrollment was 2,400. At this time, the fall enrollment was 8,593. In the middle of the 1980s, possibly as an outgrowth of the recession, there was a Technology Center referendum, which passed with strong support of business and industry in 1985. Just two years later, the Technology Center opened and offered skills training for workers in machine tool, electronics and manufacturing fields.

In the 1990s it is possible to describe our institution as a "next generation institution." It was possible for the Center for Learning and Retirement, which is based on the model of Elderhostel; it opened in 1993. In addition, the Rock Valley College Adult Education Department received a recognition by the Secretary [U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W.] Riley in June, [1994], and earlier, 1993, the Rock Valley College community received the United [States] Secretary of Commerce E Award for export training. Also in 1994 the Tech Prep students were invited to President [William J.] Clinton's signing of the schools careers bill [School-to-Work Opportunities Act], May 4, 1994. Going right along, the enrollment in fall, 1994 had jumped a little bit to 8,906.



In 1997, Karl Jacobs, after being president from 1969 until July, 1997, he retired. His successor was Dr. Roland “Chip” Chapdelaine. He was elected, or he was approved as third president. I’d mentioned the Career Development Academy, which is now known as Stenstrom Center for Career Development; that was purchased in April, 1999.

The next millennium, there was a period of growth and renewal. One of the highlights of the campus is the Bengt Sjostrom [Starlight] Theatre, which is the Starlight Theatre. That project began in 2000 and was completed in 2002. Also, this is the beginning of the time when campus facilities were given facelifts and renovations. That included the Student Center, and it has since included the library or the Educational Resource Building; it included the Physical Education Center, and at the current time it is including Classroom Building Number One. These buildings are in the thirty-five to forty-year time span, and they need renovation.

In September, 2004, the next president of the campus was selected. He selected as fourth president in September, 2004. There are many, many developments into the current time period, but those are the highlights that I feel I have time to bring to your attention.

Pogue: I’ve got a couple of questions about campus development, before we go. What is “elder hostel model?”

Thompson: Elderhostel is a program that began in Boston. It’s a concept of education for lifelong learning. In particular, the programs are adjusted so that they’re interesting to older adults, but they’re also developed in the lifelong learning model. At the time that the Center for Learning and Retirement was developed, there were centers around the country that were in commuter campuses or college campuses, and the idea was that the Elderhostel course offerings should be expanded across the country. Rock Valley College adopted that center plan in 1993 in its establishment. It’s now twenty years old, so it’s celebrating a twenty-year anniversary.

Pogue: How has the campus developed? You’ve talked about the various buildings and the phases and the referendums. Could you give us a little more on that?

Thompson: Well, to begin with, the current campus, the main campus—it’s not the only one but certainly is not the largest, because there are other campuses—it was purchased in 1965. As I mentioned, it was a farm, so the property itself that was purchased included 217 acres. In 1966 the interim campus buildings were constructed, and they were essentially wood frame buildings, but part of what was encompassed in the campus was use of the farmhouse, use of the barn and, in fact, use of some other of the outbuildings from the farm itself.

So, the quaintness of the campus for some was that, when they went to the library, the students were in the horse barn. If they went to see the

counselor, they were in the hayloft of the barn. If you visited the president, he was in the farmhouse; Clifford Erickson was in the farmhouse. You registered also in the farmhouse, at the business offices in farmhouse.

At the same time, the classroom buildings were in the wooden buildings that were adjacent or quite close, but they were known as the interim campus, because, according to the approval of voters, there was the permanent campus that was coming, and that was a Capitol Development Board project. Voters approved it, and there were five buildings that were going to be part of the new campus. For the specifics of it, I'll mention that Ernest J. Kump and Associates from California was the design architect. Durrant, Deininger, Dommer, Kramer & Gordon were the architects and engineers from Dubuque, Iowa, and C. Edward Ware and his firm from Rockford was the project architect.

In 1969, the first of the five permanent buildings were occupied. The first to be occupied was CL1, "classroom building 1," then CL2, "classroom building 2," and in the next three years, the Student Center, Educational Resources Center and Physical Education Center were occupied.

As far as the development of the campus, past the permanent buildings, it wasn't until 1985 that on the Mulford and Spring Creek campus another building was developed, and that was the Technology Center, as a result of the referendum. It was actually completed and occupied in 1987.

Then in the 1990s, the land on the north end of the campus was developed by selling bonds. The project included constructing a support services building to house functions that previously were located in the interim campus buildings. The acreage in the north half of the campus became new practice and playing fields for football, soccer and baseball. And a walking path was constructed in conjunction or cooperation with the Rockford Park District, around the periphery of the campus.

Pogue: What were some of the unique programs found at Rock Valley?

Thompson: The three that come to mind that are unique and are actually [where] students come through the cooperative agreements are the Graphic Arts Technology, Aircraft Maintenance Technology and the Mass Communications Production.

Pogue: What programs have received major recognition?

Thompson: The Dental Hygiene program. The students are highly sought after. That, I should add, is a unique program in also. In addition, the Graphic Arts Technology program was recently accredited. It is one of only ten in the United States, which the Accrediting Council for the Collegiate Graphic Communications has recognized for excellence.

Pogue: When did sports develop at Rock Valley?

Thompson: Well, the inter-collegiate sports began in 1967, but really the development of the conference didn't occur until the early '70s. That conference, [the North Central Community College Conference], the N4C, was instrumental in a lot of the inter-collegiate play. I should tell you that athletics developed at the National Guard Armory and at the YMCA and the YWCA.

In particular, I think it's interesting for people to know that women's athletics began from 1966; however, there was not a conference or inter-collegiate play until the conference could be organized. But three women's sports were part of that, including the volleyball, basketball and softball.

The traditional men's sports, which began in 1967, included baseball, in 1968 football, and side by side there was golf, women's tennis, men's tennis as part of the...and, of course, men's basketball, that was offered as well. So, very early on in the history of the college, sports were developed.

Pogue: You talked a little bit about the enrollment growth at Rock Valley, that you had a good first class, and then it suddenly ballooned. How has it been over the period of time?

Thompson: It has been cyclical. I can tell you that in 1980s, an economic recession, the college was extremely... Well, you would say enrollment was bursting at the seams. In the recent history, from 2008 until just about a year ago, extremely strong enrollment in the credit programs. And it has been that when the economy isn't as good, the enrollment is higher. I'm not versed on all of the enrollment figures.

I can tell you that, while you can make a case to say that the full-time enrollment of students is growing, sometimes the numbers are hard to track, because we don't just grant credit, but there are continuing education offerings. We have our Center for Learning and Retirement for the community education program, so there's a lot of figures. Actually, the numbers are much higher in the vocational training programs that don't result in certificates or even diplomas. I think that's a study in and of itself, but I can say that credit programs are a function of the economy, higher in bad times, and then they drop off a little bit.

But one of our goals, strategically, is to improve persistence. The college has made efforts with new student or first-year experience programs and other follow-up in order to increase the persistence of students in completing their degree or completing their certificate, as the case may be.

Pogue: You've talked already about the referendums, the original one that led to the college and then the bond referendum, and then, after some failed referendums in '72, a passage, and then in 1985 a Tech Center. Have there been any since '85?

Thompson: There have been no referendums since 1985. That was because it became possible to use bonds that were sold, with actually very good or low interest rates, so the college was able to pay off the bonds. The mill levy rate that was the beginning, I find almost amazing to think about, that is was [an] eight mill levy. In some of the paperwork that I've looked at, it's twenty-four now. I think the assessed valuation, when we began, was one billion. Currently it's seven billion. That's the assessed valuation in our district.

So, over the course of almost fifty years, that's been the change. For people who can crunch numbers better than I, those might be important figures, but those are things that I've discovered about our taxing ability. It has been more difficult in recent years to sustain programs, based on the assessed valuation dropping, now that the property values have dropped, post-recession.

Pogue: As to labor relations, how have those gone at Rock Valley?

Thompson: During the first almost, I would say probably thirty years, the labor-management relations were very much on a agreement basis. But in the 1990s, particularly when Dr. Jacobs was about to retire, that was the first appearance of a bargaining unit, and that occurred with the faculty. The faculty in 1997 had negotiated their first contract.

The contracts, typically three years long, have been negotiated several times since then. The most recent negotiations occurred for the faculty unit and were approved about June of 2012. That was a more difficult process. There were probably months of negotiation. I would say it was a year and a half without a labor agreement for the faculty.

The other bargaining unit represented on campus is the Fraternal Order of Police. That followed the 1997 agreement, but it's probably the last ten years, the Fraternal Order of Police. Other units would be described as the ESP employees and the PSA employees. ESP would be Educational Support Personnel and PSA employees would be Professional Service Association employees. That, incidentally, includes administrators. There hasn't been any formalized labor or union negotiations.

For our college, sometimes the pattern is—and it has been a pattern—is that the raises and benefits are usually based on the negotiations that occur with the faculty, and then raises and benefits continue with the PSA employees and the ESP employees.

There's one part of law that has changed recently, and that has been with our part-time, continuous employees. Some of those are more formalized, in terms of the number of hours that they are allowed to work by the labor laws. So, we've seen some changes in their compensation as a result.

Pogue: We've talked about the extension centers. You've covered that some of those were added downtown. What was the reason for going downtown?

Thompson: You're speaking about the Learning Opportunity Center, which was established downtown. With the college's mission to reach the entire district, a determination was made, really, that students who are living in certain parts of Rockford and are part of the Rockford District 205 may be the most difficult population to reach, in terms of having a campus that may seem or is perceived to be inaccessible. So, this is a campus that serves Rockford in particular, and it would probably serve students who have graduated or may have gotten their GED [General Education Diploma], but the whole idea of college needed to be made accessible for them.

The Learning Opportunity Center is continuing now into its... probably going into its fourth year, probably three and a half years. It started a little bit late. That extension center is one of three that I mentioned that is in the proximity of downtown Rockford. The second, which I may have just mentioned briefly, is the Employment Services Center, which is in North Main Street in Rockford. The reason for that's establishment is that the Illinois Department of Employment Services also has facilities at the same site. So there's cooperation between Rock Valley programs and the Illinois Department of Employment Services.

The third that is probably one should be mentioned is that there's the EIGERlab. The EIGERlab, it's an entrepreneurship center that encompasses programs that previously existed but at different sites. It has the small business development center services, and it has the procurement center, which is...it's basically a grants assistance program of writing grants, if you want to procure things from other countries. But added to it are programs that are for training in very high-tech areas. The EIGERlab is serving as an incubator for businesses that want to develop newer technology. That's located in Rockford also.

As far as why, it's really a response to the need. The Technology Center, developed in 1987, was twenty-five years old, and some of the training programs that were at the Technology Center had to be tweaked and changed and made more responsive to industry. So, the EIGERlab was developed, as far as taking some of those and consolidating them into a particular location.

I think that doesn't necessarily talk about all the extension centers, but those are the major ones. We've talked about Stenstrom Center, which is in the south part of Rockford on major Highways 20 and 251.

Pogue: As far as tuition and school funding, the original concept of funding community colleges was the three-legged stool, with tuition, property tax and the State. I would assume that Rock Valley, like the others, is seeing gradual

declines in State funding and greater reliance on local funds, as well as tuition. How has tuition been at Rock Valley?

Thompson: Tuition has always been part of the lowest rate among community colleges, and it has been affordable. It's made it possible for many students, who would like to transfer following their two years, to go to four-year schools. It has been a subject of our board of trustees. Their thoughts of recent years is to keep it at a very modest rate; any increases would be very modest. We were informed during the last six months that we needed, absolutely needed, to increase tuition, because it wasn't consistent, or it didn't conform with the amount of tuition that the other community colleges were charging for the credit hour.

I would say the three-legged stool is very consistent with what our experience has been. It was explained to me that one-third is property taxes; one-third is the tuition, and one-third, roughly, is the State portion of our reimbursement.

Probably the more difficult parts are how much money will be coming from the State of Illinois and, even more recently, the property tax. As I mentioned, the equal assessed valuation has been a very difficult challenge for us during, actually, the past year or going into the next year. There have been some difficulties with that. So, the college has had a level budget; it hasn't increased any, and some positions that normally would be filled are not filled, in order to make up the difference in lower revenues from the sources.

Pogue: You share a border with Wisconsin and when we began the interview, you talked about your own experience with Wisconsin. Does Rock Valley have some relationships with schools in Wisconsin?

Thompson: The notable one that we have is with the Blackhawk Technical Institute; that's in Janesville. Students who live in Janesville or in the district can come to Rock Valley, and likewise students that are in Rockford can go to Blackhawk Technical College. Excuse me, I called it "Institute;" it's "Technical College."

Examples of the programs that students from the Blackhawk Technical District can enroll in include aviation maintenance; building construction; dental hygiene; electronic engineering technology; fitness, wellness and sport; graphic arts technology; media production; manufacturing engineering; respiratory care; and sustainable energy systems.

Pogue: What has Rock Valley been noted for?

Thompson: I think probably those that I mentioned earlier are going to be among those that are noted. I mentioned aviation maintenance, and I would have mentioned dental hygiene, graphic arts technology. Those are unique programs. But also, I'll mention that sometimes nursing is a very strong program at Rock Valley. We have a number of allied health programs that include respiratory care,

surgical technology, besides dental hygiene and nursing. I would say that those are high-quality programs, accredited, and the tuition is extremely reasonable.

Pogue: As far as some of the buildings, you've talked about how the Stenstrom Center was named and that the Karl Jacobs Center was named for one of your early presidents. How about the theater? How did it get its name?

Thompson: The name "Bengt Sjostrom," I'll spell it; it's actually spelled this way, B-e-n-g-t, and Sjostrom is spelled S-j-o-s-t-r-o-m. Bengt Sjostrom was a founder of the Sjostrom Construction Company. Sjostrom Construction Company has had involvement in road construction, and then they're a general contractor, based in Rockford. Bengt Sjostrom, as founder, enjoyed the Starlight Theatre, and the Sjostrom family has been involved in the college, including leadership on the board of trustees. So, when the theater was renovated, or actually the roof was added to the theatre—it's an award-winning design—the Sjostroms contributed probably more in-kind labor and, of course, funds for the theater.

Another building that I should mention is Karl Jacobs Center for Science and Math. Karl Jacobs, as a community college president in Illinois, was one of the longest running presidents. I'm thinking that's twenty-seven years that he was president at Rock Valley. This is the new building that I've not mentioned, is this one, Karl Jacobs Center. It was just a tribute that two years ago the building would be named after someone that was very strongly associated with the college for those years.

I should mention one more building. The technology center was renamed, and it was named the Woodward Technology Center. Woodward Governors is the former name [of the business], but Woodward is involved in aviation technology.<sup>3</sup> They're a very strong part of the Rockford region, so it was a naming opportunity. It really helped the college, as far as improving the facility. It was renamed, probably within the last ten years, to Woodward Technology Center.

Pogue: Well, Steve, I have just a couple of final questions for our interview. The first deals with the Fast Track program; could you explain that?

Thompson: Well, the Fast Track program is part of the EIGERlab that I had mentioned. It helps graduates achieve their dreams for employment. One of the highlights is that it is a collaboration that Rock Valley has with TechWorks to create an intensive 150-hour CNC machine operated training program.<sup>4,5</sup> Students are immersed in hands-on learning, as well as classroom instruction.

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<sup>3</sup> A governor or speed limiter or controller is a device used to measure and regulate the speed of a machine, such as an engine.

<sup>4</sup> TechWorks is an employer-driven, six to eight-week training organization that develops and delivers a customized curriculum to prepare participants for careers in advanced manufacturing.

When they complete the Fast Track program, students are better prepared for the abundant manufacturing jobs in our community. Vincent Knepper, a recent Fast Track graduate, used his training to pursue his dream job. He's actually now working with the EIGERlab and training students in the CNC machine operator intensive program.

Programs similar to that that are highlights are programs with our high school. That's part of Alignment Rockford program.<sup>6</sup> The students have a similar experience in which a handful are guaranteed employment, following their training. They have a job placement. This is, again, based on the industrial base of our community. They're trained in that manufacturing area. For a high school student to have a guarantee of a job, following graduation, is one of the ways in which we're moving more and more into focused training and education for our career development.

I think those are some outcomes that are worth highlighting, as we end the interview, since most of what I've talked about is the structure of the college. But these are some of the ways that the college is providing an innovative training experience for students in our community.

Pogue: Here's our last question. Having started to work here in 2002, what do you feel will be the challenges facing Rock Valley over the next decade?

Thompson: I would say, right at this point, and I would observe that the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Illinois Community College Act is significant in that there's a change in generation that's already started to occur. But our students are engaging in different ways. I noticed that, in particular, in the library field, that social media plays a much larger part of the way in which they engage.

In addition, the challenge of the college itself is to continue to be a leader, as far as economic development. Major challenges within the school district or the high school programs include the lack of completion of high school, and how does the college reach the students and more clearly develop career paths that would make that completion or direction in career area?

As far as the next steps for the community colleges, we've already begun on a new generation of leadership. I would [cite] Gerald Smith, who wrote a community college history, from 1945 through 1980.<sup>7</sup> That period, if you think about it, is thirty-five years. Then, if you take from 1980 to 2015, you find that that's another thirty-five years. Well, in my work as an archivist

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<sup>5</sup> CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machining is a process used in the manufacturing sector that involves the use of computers to control machine tools.

<sup>6</sup> Alignment Rockford is a collaborative framework, formed to improve the area's public education through facilitating the focus of community resources on the fulfillment of the strategic plan of Rockford Public Schools District 205.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Smith, Illinois Junior-Community College Development, authored a document, titled "Illinois Junior-Community College Development 1946-1980" for the Illinois Community College Board in October 1980.



and some knowledge of history, that's two generations. So, I'm thinking about meeting the needs of not only new generations of students, but there's a constant evolution of the personnel that are in community colleges that provide the leadership.

Certainly we [Rock Valley College], in the next year, are facing the hiring of the next president. That would be the fifth long-standing president that we've ever had after Dr. Jack Becherer. I think that would be, for our local college, a challenge.

The national agenda that has been more focused since President Obama became president in 2009, is accountability and also degree and certificate completion. He's really looking for at least community colleges to be accountable for the dollars that come from federal funds, and then it translates to Illinois funds for what students accomplish as a result of their time in college and education.

It's more and more important for us, when we initiate activity in the college level, to know the outcomes that we desire to have and to collect data that would demonstrate that we're being accountable to the citizens and to the students that are part of our charge. Thank you.

Pogue: Well, Steve, I want to thank you for giving us an overview of Rock Valley, which began in 1964, and bringing us up to date to the current time, also for your role as an archivist here at the college.

Thompson: Thank you very much, Phil. I appreciate the opportunity to talk.

(end of transcript)