

# Centennial College:

## UNL's educational response to a demand for alternatives

By Kema Soderberg  
Sower Reporter

**B**ill Lock's mother had a few words of advice just before he left home to enroll at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln his freshman year.

"Cut your hair," she urged.

Sage advice today . . . perhaps. Not then. Not in 1969.

Bill Lock's haircut marked him when he arrived on campus. Razor cuts were out back then. The long-hairs had taken over. They were considered an irreverent lot, questioning long-held stereotypes, demanding changes.

Freshly shorn Bill Lock, in fact, enrolled in a program that had resulted from such student agitation — Centennial College.

The college was based on the premise that traditional educational programs were unsuited for the demands of a modern world. A new approach was needed, said the activists, and proceeded to fashion a less rigid academic approach to learning.

From the start, there were doubters. Even today, four years after the program was closed down, there is disagreement about the merits of Centennial.

Some — founding senior fellow professor Robert Knoll, for one — say Centennial became a problem child. He argues that the college was a child born of parents who never fully agreed on rearing methods. As a result, it became somewhat irresponsible during what could be likened to pre-adolescence.

But many of Centennial's students and some faculty members who helped develop the program defend it and its concepts. Some say the closing of Centennial in 1981 was like the death of a close friend. Knoll said students conceived the idea of Centennial College and brought it to him. They hoped the college would:

- Offer a program of interdisciplinary study that would allow students to combine disciplines like history, physics and English while exploring topics they or faculty members found interesting.
- Be an experiment in communal living. Men and women living and studying together, they felt, would learn and grow together academically, emotionally and spiritually.
- Promote direct, personal exchange between professors and students. Like Socrates' tutoring of Plato, instructors also could seek answers to questions and beliefs. Students and instructors would drop their labels and become people.
- Become a haven for activists.

One of the first brochures mailed to high school academic advisers said Centennial "respects the values and motivations of its participants and it avoids, as far as possible, supple-



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menting or replacing personal motivation by any institutional system of rewards and sanctions."

The students and faculty fondly called Centennial a college, although it never was sanctioned as one by the Legislature. The program was experimental and founders did not want to invest the time and money it would take to lobby the Legislature for the distinction.

Because it was not a college, students could not get degrees in Centennial. Instead, they enrolled for six hours in the program and nine outside. Centennial credits were dubbed humanities courses and in some cases were core-course substitutes.

Instructors were drawn from throughout the university to teach a two-year stint at Centennial in addition to their more traditional duties.

Although fellows agreed upon the dreams, opinions varied about how to meet them. For example, Knoll wanted Centennial to be an honors college and wanted to allow only academically inclined high school students to enroll. Other faculty members and students did not want to limit benefits Centennial could provide. In the end, a cross-section of students was accepted into the program.

This and other differences in educational philosophy caused Knoll to leave the program when his two years were up.

"If they learned anything, it was in spite of us rather than because of us," he said. "The theory was fine but there was no discipline. It started out academically and intellectually permissive."

Ed Homze, a fellow during the first two years and currently a history professor, said some of the students were slackers, but most upperclassmen were well motivated. The fellows wanted to get students "turned on" to education, he said, but could not decide how long to wait for those who were not.

When Centennial reached pre-adolescence in the mid-1970s, there were increased complaints that students did not earn the credits they received. One UNL graduate said he has six credits of "A" for doing nothing.

June Levine, a fellow from spring 1973 to the end of the academic year in 1974, acknowledged that there were problems.

"There were some students who were wandering intellectually and spiritually, but I think that's okay, too, because they were wandering through a very fertile field."