“Be their names ever honored,” said one of the speakers at the dedication of Boynton Hall in 1868 in tribute to the Institute’s founders, “honored among their fellow citizens, among their friends and cultivators of sound learning everywhere, as well as among those to the latest generation, who shall especially reap the fruits of their wise beneficence.”

Who shall especially—in no other category fall the friends, the trustees, the alumni, the teachers, and students of Worcester Polytechnic Institute in the year of 1965.

During the hundred years of W.P.I.’s existence many similar schools have been founded. Some have disappeared, others have thrived. The calendar has been the same for all of them—admissions, semesters, graduations; the activities—social, athletic, and academic. The development of complexity has been parallel, the evolution of administration, comparable.

What, then, has made Worcester Tech unique? This is a question which deserves an answer before the Institute picks up the challenge of what will make it unique in the future.

In the first place, the school has never known exactly what it was. Its founding definitions were too new, too broad, too hazy, to label it with any of the usual names or hamper it with any of the prescribed patterns. The direction of each word in the school’s first name, the Worcester County Free Institute of Industrial Science, resolved into healthy, continuous argument for many years. Even after the adoption of a new name, the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, the old concepts clung like barnacles. By the time of its Centennial observance, the school had long been acknowledged a college of engineering and science, and a new name for a new role seemed to be imminent.

This constant search for identity has kept the school always a-growing, always a-building. Rarely an imitator, sometimes an innovator, the Institute has seldom been less than conservative at many points where it did not matter, but always brave enough where it did. Moreover, Tech has expressed an eagerness to work out its own destiny.

At some edge of its educational program, the Institute has always maintained contact with the real work of the world. The school has prospered and languished according to the proportionate strength of this contact, and the steam of endless controversy produced by it has generated unbelievable energy for the professors.

Human progress has always depended on the proverbial conflict between the dream and reality. Sometimes one is in the lead; sometimes the other. This is not a new idea, nor especially worthy of note, except that at Tech the two have existed under the same roof since the day the school first opened its doors. There was

Since we live in an age of innovation, a practical education must prepare a man for work that does not yet exist and cannot yet be clearly defined.

—Peter F. Drucker
even one founder for each factor. It has not always been a comfortable living arrangement, but when the battling has been the fiercest, the school has been at its most alert. The Institute will doubtless change in many ways as differences between theory and fact continue to lessen, and there are many persons who face the prospect with dismay. Let them be different, they say—like male and female—but let them learn how to live together more happily.

Worcester Tech has maintained an unusual relationship with the community in which it lives, its first building created from one of Worcester’s own granite ribs. It was the mechanic, the lawyer, the minister, and the manufacturer who lived around the corner who built the school and brought it up as their own. Alternately they have ignored and interfered, praised and criticized, protected and betrayed. But it is their own. For many years before the building of dormitories, Worcester homes were the homes of the students. And ever since, no matter where the students and teachers have come from or with what background, they have been welcomed as members of the Worcester family.

The school has reciprocated. There has never been a time when the professors have not been willing to lend a hand in municipal planning, when the doors of the Institute have not been open to its neighbors. First there were courses in drawing, long before the subject was taught in public schools. For many summers young boys, eight to thirteen years old, were taught woodworking in the Shops. Then there were public lectures, courses for mechanics, and Civil Defense instruction. Now there are seminars, colloquiums, Scientific Briefings for Tomorrow, the School of Industrial Management, and the Evening Graduate School. With students coming from sixteen foreign countries, with staff participation in teacher-refresher programs sponsored by the National Science Foundation, and with the adoption of a missionary interest in a sister Institute—the Scree Mullapudi in India—W.P.I. often finds itself in the neighborhood of a wider world. But the sense of proprietorship has not changed.

For these factors of uniqueness—the constant inquiry into identity, the contact with the work-a-day world, the reconciliation of the practical with the scientific, the community sense of belonging—there has been a price. There have been contributions of time and funds and effort far beyond the accounting. Nerves have been rubbed raw with abrasive argument, careers have sometimes been mistakenly shattered. There has been an astonishing number of persons willing to be hurt in order to keep faith with self and society, and the integrity thus given to the Institute is its proudest claim to distinction.

Today the Institute stands solidly atop its rounded hill, still overlooking the City and reaching toward the sky. It stands there for more than any other reason because—by some strange and wonderful supply—there have always been enough people who cared.

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This is not a bibliography but an informal list of sources, included primarily for that person of the future who will again bring Worcester Tech's history up to date. —M.M.T.

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