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Countdown to College: Launching Florida Institute of Technology

by GORDON PATTERSON

EAST central Florida underwent a revolution in the 1950s as an army of 75,000 technicians, engineers, and scientists poured into the sleepy fishing communities stretching from Titusville to Melbourne along the Atlantic Coast.¹ The year 1958 was one of significant change for the country and for Florida. In January, the United States launched its first satellite into orbit. In July, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the bill creating the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). A month later the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) called for the creation of a new super-rocket code-named Saturn.² Less attention was paid to young RCA physicist Jerry Keuper's May announcement of the creation of Brevard Engineering Institute (BEI). When classes began in September the school's name had changed to Brevard Engineering College (BEC). In 1966, the school became known as the Florida Institute of Technology.

Brevard Engineering College was the offspring of America's space program. Like the space program, the college faced formidable financial, institutional, and political hurdles during its early years. In 1958, Americans pinned their hopes on the "elbow of land jutting out into the Atlantic" where scientists, engineers, and technicians prepared America's response to the Soviet space challenge.³ Twenty-nine miles to the south, in tiny Melbourne, a handful of rocket scientists and engineers launched a technological college designed to meet the educational needs of America's missilemen.

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1. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard Edition), January 14, 1959, in Scrapbook 1:24, Florida Institute of Technology Historical Records, 1958-, Special Collections, Evans Library, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne (hereinafter cited as Scrapbook).
2. Charles D. Benson and William Barnaby Faherty, *Moonport: A History of Apollo Launch Facilities and Operations* (Washington, D.C., 1978), 2. Also available at [HTTP://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/Moonport/chl-1.html](http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/Moonport/chl-1.html).
3. Benson and Faherty, *Moonport*, 4.

In the twelve years since the end of World War II, America had lost its preeminent position within the international scientific and technological community. On May 29, 1947, United States Army personnel launched a modified V-2 rocket at the White Sands Test Range in New Mexico. The rocket went the wrong way and landed in a cemetery in Juarez, Mexico. This was one of several factors that prompted the Joint Chiefs of Staff to choose the east coast of Florida for future rocket experiments. In the late 1940s east central Florida was a "comparatively unsettled place."⁴ At the beginning of World War II, Cocoa Beach, "a small ocean resort built on a dune ridge along the shore," had a population of thirty-one.⁵ By 1950, Cocoa Beach's population had grown to 245. Melbourne's population was 4,223.⁶ Three additional factors contributed to the selection of Cape Canaveral as the site for America's rocket program. The Banana River Naval Station near Melbourne provided a potential support base, and the Bahama Islands furnished ideal locations for the chain of missile tracking stations. Finally, the Cape's easy access by water eased transportation problems.⁷

Only a few paved roads and tracks (but plenty of rattlesnakes and mosquitoes) graced Cape Canaveral when the first technicians arrived in 1948. The first launch from the Cape took place on July 24, 1950. The blockhouse for the mission was an old shed used by swimmers to change into their swimsuits. Engineers and technicians knelt behind sandbags as the countdown reached its conclusion. Twenty-nine miles to the south in Melbourne, people stopped in parking lots and watched a missile called Bumper 8 streak off into the heavens.⁸ Florida's missile age had begun.

America's space program encountered numerous obstacles during the ensuing eight years. The Korean War tapped the nation's resources, and the era's virulent anticommunism fostered a distrust of scientists and government programs. Perhaps more fundamental, Americans in the 1950s were less interested in pioneer-

4. Ibid.

5. *Melbourne Daily Times*, June 1962, in Scrapbook, 3:7.

6. Ted Smart, "Cape Canaveral Launches Money Boom in Florida," *Chicago's American*, May 22, 1962, in Scrapbook, 3:87.

7. Benson and Faherty, *Moonport*, 4.

8. The first launch at Cape Canaveral was scheduled for July 19, 1950. Bumper 7, a modified German V-2 rocket that served as the first stage with a WAC Corporal as the second stage, "fizzled" on the launch pad. Salt had corroded the rocket's engine. Five days later Bumper 8 lifted off. See Benson and Faherty, *Moonport*, 6-7.



Cape Canaveral, c. 1950. Map Courtesy of the National Aeronautics and Space Association.

ing than in celebrating the good life as portrayed in shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie and Harriet*. All of this changed on October 4, 1957, when the Soviets successfully launched Sputnik, sending a shock wave across the nation. Within a month the Russians had a second Sputnik, weighing 1,100 pounds and carrying a barking dog named Laika, in orbit. On December 6, 1957, an American Vanguard rocket carrying a four-pound satellite blew up on the launch pad. The following day the *London Daily Express* ran the banner headline "U.S. Calls it Kaputnik." Edward Teller warned that the United States faced a "technological Pearl Harbor." Commentators blamed American education, and thousands rushed to buy a book entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Nathan Pusey, president of Harvard University, called on the nation to commit a higher percentage of its gross national product to education.⁹ President Eisenhower and the rest of the nation looked to the Cape for America's response.

Three months after Sputnik, on January 31, 1958, Explorer 1, America's first satellite, lifted into orbit. Putting a satellite into orbit was only the first step in meeting the Soviet threat. The long-term success of America's space program rested on the shoulders of the nation's scientists and engineers. There were, however, dis-

9. David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York, 1993), 625-26

turbing trends in American higher education. In 1959, the Engineering Manpower Commission reported that “freshman engineering registrations dropped 11 percent” against an overall 7 percent increase in college enrollments since 1958.¹⁰ Fewer young people were choosing science and engineering as their college majors. Perhaps worse still, the scientists, engineers, and technicians at the Cape lacked an opportunity to advance their education.

Jerry Keuper had just crossed the Florida state line driving a station wagon towing his 1952 MG when he heard Major General John B. Medaris, commander of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency (ABMA), announce the launch of Explorer I. Keuper, his wife, Natalie, and their infant daughter, Melanie, were on their way to Melbourne where Keuper, a nuclear physicist with a doctorate from the University of Virginia and a master’s degree from Stanford University, had accepted a position as a senior engineer in RCA’s Systems Analysis section of the Missile Test Project (MTP).¹¹

Keuper had spent the previous five years working for the Remington Arms Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut. In the evenings he taught calculus at the Bridgeport Engineering Institute (BEI). Arthur Keating founded BEI in 1924 to meet the needs of individuals who wished to become engineers but who were unable to enroll in a traditional university program. Keating took a liking to the lanky physicist and appointed Keuper chairman of the mathematics department. Keuper remembered discussing with Keating his impending move to Florida. One thing troubled him. He liked teaching and there were no nearby colleges or universities. Keuper asked Keating what he thought of the idea of starting a Florida branch of Bridgeport Engineering Institute. “No,” Dr. Keating barked, “start your own college.”¹²

Keuper considered the idea. Bridgeport was in the midst of applying to the Connecticut Department of Higher Education for a license to offer an associate degree in engineering. Keating had charged Keuper with organizing the accreditation process. As a hedge, Keuper made copies of the BEI accreditation documents.

10. *Miami Herald* (Brevard Edition), December 28, 1959.

11. Jerome P. Keuper, “Founding Florida Institute of Technology: Conception,” manuscript (9704) (1996), 1, Florida Institute of Technology Historical Records.

12. “Dinner Planned for FIT’s Founder-President,” unidentified newsclipping, [September 1968?], in Scrapbook, 14:38-39.



Brevard Engineering College founder Jerry Keuper standing in front of Technical Laboratory at Patrick Air Force Base with his 1952 MG. *Photograph courtesy of Florida Institute of Technology Historical Records, Special Collections, Evans Library, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne.*

By the time he reached Melbourne, Keuper decided to follow Keating's advice. His 1952 MG still had a BEI (Bridgeport Engineering Institute) parking decal on the window. Why not call the school Brevard Engineering Institute? he thought.

During his initial weeks as chief scientist in RCA's Systems Analysis Group, Keuper weighed the possibilities for starting a college. The position of Florida's aerospace industry, Keuper believed, was analogous to that of northeastern industries in the late nineteenth century. A tradition of higher education existed in the Northeast that supplied a pool of educated technicians and engineers to area industries. East central Florida was different. There were no technical or engineering schools in the region.

Keuper shared his idea of starting a college with three members of the Systems Analysis team. After work, mathematicians George Peters and Donya Dixon and computer scientist Robert Kelly would often meet Keuper at the Pelican Bar on state highway A1A where Keuper outlined his plan.¹³ Keating's Bridgeport Engineering Institute would serve as their model. Classes would be offered in the evenings, the faculty would be drawn from the Missile Test Project, and missilemen would be the students. The curriculum would be tailored to meet the needs of technicians and engineers who wished to advance.¹⁴

Brevard Engineering Institute grew from these musings at the Pelican Bar. A young inertial guidance engineer named Harold Dibble joined the group in the early spring. Dibble, who had earned his doctorate from Cornell University and had taught in the evening engineering program at the University of California at Los Angeles, brought valuable experience to the discussions. The group delegated responsibilities. Keuper was to be the school's president, Dibble took the title of dean, Peters became the head of the mathematics department, Kelly agreed to serve as the school's

13. George Peters held a master's degree in mathematics from MIT and a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Georgia. Peters worked at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia and taught at Drexel Institute of Technology and Johns Hopkins University's evening school. He came to Florida in 1957 when he accepted a position as a member of RCA's scientific staff. Besides leading BEC's mathematics department, Peters served as acting chairman of the electrical engineering department. *Melbourne Daily Times*, August 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:14.

14. Keuper, "Founding," 1.

financial officer, and Donya Dixon was named the organization's secretary.¹⁵

Over the next few weeks Keuper and his confederates drafted a four-page outline of Brevard Engineering Institute. Classes would be held Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings between seven and ten o'clock. Students could pursue courses in mechanical and electrical engineering and "possibly business administration." The undergraduate program would lead to an associate degree in three years. BEI would apply for regional accreditation as soon possible. Classes would be limited to "approximately fifteen students." Admission was open to any individual with a high school diploma. Graduate courses would be added to the curriculum "once the mechanism of the school has been set in motion." Faculty and administrators would consist of "professional men, regularly employed in local business and industry. In each case, men will be selected to teach in the subject area most related to their regular employment and where their college background shows academic strength." There would be, however, "no full time instructors, administrator, or employees (with the possible exception of a registrar)." A board of directors would be chosen from local "scientific, industrial, and civic leaders." Keuper shared responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the school with Dibble, Kelly, Peters, and Dixon.¹⁶

Kelly raised the question of finances. Planning was essential, but eventually the school was going to need some operating capital. Keuper, Dibble, and Kelly held special meetings at the Pelican Bar to map out a fundraising strategy. The fledgling missile college received its first cash donation when one of Keuper's friends volunteered the thirty-seven cents change from a phone call.¹⁷

15. Harold Dibble was described in several early press releases as "co-founder" of Brevard Engineering College. According to Jerry Keuper, Dibble's wife wrote the school's early press releases. Dibble joined RCA at the Missile Test Project at Patrick AFT in 1958. Dibble came to the Cape in 1955 to work as a guidance analyst with North American Aviation on the Navaho missile. He graduated first in his class from Cornell in 1949 with a degree in mechanical engineering. Dibble received his Ph.D. from Cornell in theoretical mechanics. In 1961, Dibble severed all connections with the school and returned to California. Keuper, "Founding," 4; *RCA Service Newsletter* 15 (January 1959), in Scrapbook, 1:29.

16. "The Brevard Engineering Institute," Correspondence File (5800), Florida Institute of Technology Historical Records.

17. Keuper, "Founding," 5.

Later in the spring, Keuper made a more serious attempt to win recognition and financial support for the college when he asked the Brevard Joint Chamber of Commerce for its endorsement. Norman Lund Sr., chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, was enthusiastic. Lund had come to Melbourne in 1923 to build U.S. Highway 1. He later became the business manager for Melbourne Village. Despite Lund's support, the Chamber gave Keuper a lukewarm reception and tabled the motion until their next meeting. Later Keuper learned that the Chamber "had turned down my request and [had] voted to invite the University of Miami to come to Brevard County and set up a similar educational program."¹⁸ Keuper recalled being "disheartened" by the episode until he learned that the dean of engineering at the University of Miami had rebuffed the Chamber's overture saying, "Let Keuper do it[;] he is on the scene and probably can [do] a better job than we could."¹⁹

Running on enthusiasm alone, Keuper's "administration" spent April and May working out the details for BEI. The Brevard County Schools agreed to rent BEI three classrooms at Eau Gallie Junior High School. On May 19, 1958, Melbourne's *Daily Times* reported that "Dr. Jerome P. Keuper, president of Brevard Engineering Institute, [announced that] the area's first engineering college will open this fall."²⁰ To raise both public awareness of the institute and money for the publication of the Institute's first catalogue, Keuper and his colleagues organized an "Engineer's Cotillion, a semi-formal dance" at the Trade Winds Club in Indialantic.²¹ The evening's entertainment featured singers Natalie Keuper and Mary Hayward, a former Broadway musical star; Hawaiian dancer Lilo Williamson; and a barbershop quartet. Louie Camp, principal of Indialantic Elementary School, served as the evening's master of ceremonies, and Tom Doherty, the owner of the Trade Winds Club, catered the event.²²

The Engineer's Cotillion was nearly a disaster. The evening started on a sour note when Keuper quarrelled with Doherty over the hors d'oeuvres as the guests were arriving. Eventually, Keuper

18. Keuper, "Founding," 5-6.

19. *Ibid.*, 6.

20. *Melbourne Daily Times*, May 19, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:4.

21. *Melbourne Daily Times*, May 19, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:5.

22. *Melbourne Daily Times*, June 6, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:9.

"invited Doherty to step outside and settle the matter." As they were preparing to leave, one of the guests whispered to Keuper that Doherty was a champion amateur boxer. Keuper suggested that they move on to the evening's planned entertainment.²³

The Cotillion raised enough money to print a catalog for the fall semester. A few days later Harold Dibble announced that registration for classes would be held at the Country Club Road office of the University of Melbourne.²⁴ Much to his surprise, the prospective students informed Keuper that they did not want to attend an "institute"; they wanted to go to college. Keuper agreed, and overnight Brevard Engineering Institute became Brevard Engineering College (BEC).²⁵

The course catalog appeared in July. Nine classes were listed: Advanced Calculus, Transients in Linear Systems, Statistics and Probability Theory I, Modern Algebra, Advanced Circuitry Analysis, Servomechanisms, Electromagnetic Fields, Transistor Theory I, and Numerical Analysis.²⁶ Tuition for one course was \$35; \$68 for two; and \$96 for three. Classes were scheduled to begin on September 22, 1958. Moreover, Dibble announced that the school intended to offer graduate courses leading to a master's degree in electrical engineering and applied mathematics. Dibble explained that the "basic philosophy of the graduate division" of BEC was to offer courses which were designed around the special expertise of the individuals working at the Cape. "The men who are doing the teaching," Keuper added, "are practicing what they teach in the day time." As an example he cited a course on rocket propulsion taught by Sebastian J. D'Alli, a member of a local engineering firm who possessed extensive knowledge of rocket engines.²⁷

Alten Thresher, dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), gave BEC an unexpected boost in July 1958. Keuper had met Dean Thresher during his undergraduate years at MIT. Earlier in the summer Keuper wrote to Thresher and described his plan to develop BEC on the model of the Bridgeport Engineering Institute. "I have always felt," Dean Thresher replied, "that the Bridgeport Engineering Institute represented a very

23. Jerome P. Keuper, interview with author, April 4, 1997, Melbourne Beach.

24. *Melbourne Sunday Times*, June 15, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:10.

25. The first reference to Brevard Engineering College appeared in *Melbourne Sunday Times*, June 15, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:10.

26. *Melbourne Daily Times*, July 28, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:12.

27. *Melbourne Daily Times*, August 25, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:15.

sound and viable educational effort, and it is good to know that the pattern is now being reproduced in Florida. We are entirely willing to consider for possible credit here subjects given at Brevard which are substantially equivalent in content." Thresher had visited Melbourne in 1957 and knew about the educational "problems in that area." Brevard Engineering College, Thresher concluded "seems to be an excellent solution to some of them."²⁸

BEC's first faculty meeting was held at Hensel's Red Rooster Restaurant in Eau Gallie on September 18. The forty-five prospective faculty members were told that 154 students (114 undergraduate and 40 graduate) had registered for classes. The average age of the applicants was thirty-three. Six women were among the first students. Keuper explained that the purpose of BEC was to "train men and women who might not otherwise gain such an education in engineering, the sciences, and business administration." He informed the faculty that he had written to the Southern Accrediting Association in Atlanta for guidance. Association personnel indicated in their response that they were aware of the special problems that a school like BEC faced and promised to begin "studies to find a method for accrediting specialized technical schools."²⁹ Dean Dibble and the school's treasurer, Robert Kelly, outlined the school's procedures and teaching assignments. Kelly summarized the school's financial situation and told the faculty that an agreement had been reached with the National Bank of Cocoa to help students finance their tuition.³⁰

The following evening a mass meeting of BEC students and faculty was held at Eau Gallie Junior High School, located north of what is now the South Brevard Branch Court House. Students purchased their books and course materials in the school's foyer. When George Peters introduced Keuper as the school's president, one student called out: "Hey, he is the guy who sold me the pencils."³¹ Selling pencils was simple. Arranging with publishers to ship books was more difficult. One of the publishers sent their books

28. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard edition), July 10, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:13.

29. *Melbourne Daily Times*, September 19, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:17.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Keuper, "Founding," 6. The school's name was eventually changed to Central Junior High School. In the 1990's Central Junior High School was moved to a new facility. In 1997, classes for Sherwood Elementary School were being held at the site while a new building was being constructed for the elementary school.

C.O.D. to the Eau Gallie post office. Keuper and Kelly managed the book sale in such a way that they were able to “collect enough money from the sale of other books to bail out the rest of them.”³² Necessity would compel similar financial juggling in years to come.

“I’ve only been fishing once in the last five weeks,” BEC student Arthur Penfield told a reporter for the *Miami Herald*. “I haven’t got time . . . and I’m a rabid fisherman.”³³ Penfield was a fairly typical BEC student. A forty-year-old retired navy chief warrant officer, Penfield worked at the Cape as a computer specialist. The navy trained him to be a technician “who can get by” on what he knows. He, however, wanted to be an engineer. BEC gave him an opportunity for advancement.

Glenn Routh, a thirty-two-year-old Boeing technician working on the Bomarc missile, went back to school for similar reasons. BEC was his last chance to become an engineer.³⁴ RCA and the other base contractors faced the constant threat of losing their best technicians because of the lack of educational opportunities. “Engineers like to continue studying,” student John Wright observed. “That’s why places like Boston with MIT, and Chicago and Los Angeles are so appealing. Brevard College will help us keep engineers in the area.” At the Cape, Wright led a team of twelve engineers charged with devising firing mechanisms. Wright enrolled in BEC to earn a degree in space technology.³⁵

BEC’s first students and faculty were hard workers. Five weeks into the first semester the faculty met at the Red Rooster Restaurant to compare notes on their classes. “I’ve never seen students slave like this,” one faculty member observed.³⁶ Eight of the twenty-three faculty members held doctorates. Like their students, most of the faculty were employed by private contractors at the Cape. Keuper and Dibble had recruited seventy-five students from among their fellow RCA workers.³⁷ BEC drew students from contractors such as General Electric, Aerojet, Convair, and Radiation, Incorporated.

Midway into its first semester BEC won national recognition when both *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines sent reporters to cover the college. *Newsweek* praised the determination of both the faculty and

32. Ibid.

33. *Miami Herald* (Brevard Edition), November 17, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:19.

34. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard Edition), November 30, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:21.

35. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard Edition), November 30, 1958, in Scrapbook, 1:21.

36. “Missilemen at School,” *Newsweek*, November 24, 1958, 70.

37. *RCA Missile Test Project News* 5 (January, 1959)

students. "While technicians at Cape Canaveral prepared for the Army's first attempt to raise a rocket to the moon," the *Newsweek* reporter declared, "a project to raise the educational level of the base's personnel moved smoothly into orbit last week."³⁸

Final examinations for the first semester were held during the last week of January 1959. The regents of the University of Melbourne, which sporadically offered non-credit seminars on global issues, contributed a \$40 prize for freshmen enrolled in algebra, engineering, drawing, and chemistry courses.³⁹ John B. Dillon, owner of Dillon Reality Company and the Brevard Real Estate School, contributed a \$25 prize for the top calculus student.⁴⁰ Twenty-six-year-old Richard Argo, an RCA employee, triumphed over one hundred students to win the \$40 dollar top freshman prize.⁴¹ John Richard, thirty years old, won the Dillon Math Prize.⁴²

Classes for BEC's second semester began on February 2, 1959. Sixteen courses were listed in the college's January announcement. Two additional classes were offered at the University of Melbourne's Country Club Road office on Tuesday and Thursday evenings: a professional engineers' license review and an introduction to technical Russian. Dibble and Keuper shared responsibility for the engineer review. Helen Hopkins taught the technical Russian course. Hopkins, the child of Russian émigrés was a Bryn Mawr College graduate. Before coming to Florida, she had taught at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.⁴³ The technical Russian course was the first BEC course taught by a woman.

Early in February Dibble announced the appointment of Ray Work as chairman of BEC's electrical engineering department. Work, a graduate of Ohio State University, came to Florida in 1954 as an installation design manager with RCA.⁴⁴ In the fall of 1958, Work enrolled in BEC's graduate program. Work impressed Keuper and Dibble with his enthusiasm for the school. Officially, he was charged with organizing the curriculum for a program that

38. "Missilemen at School," 70.

39. *Melbourne Sunday Times*, January 18, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:24.

40. *Melbourne Daily Times*, January 21, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:24.

41. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard Edition), March 4, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:28.

42. *Melbourne Sunday Times*, March 1, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:27.

43. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard Edition), January 13, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:23.

44. *Melbourne Daily Times*, February 3, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:26.

would lead to a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. Unofficially, Work served as BEC's "registrar" at RCA.⁴⁵

BEC found itself in the midst of a local controversy in March 1959. Keuper learned that the Brevard County School Board was not going to renew the college's contract to rent classrooms at Eau Gallie Junior High School. Woodrow Darden, county superintendent of schools, cited several reasons for the Board's decision. Darden argued that BEC presented "competition" to the "proposed junior college" currently under consideration. "Taxpayers' money is involved," Darden declared. "If a junior college would be put into operation, the private school would be a duplication of service." Moreover, Darden added, "night activities like this create a problem, because teachers cannot return to work in the classrooms and there are parking jams and other things."⁴⁶

High among the "other things" that made BEC a problem for Woody Darden was the school's admissions policy. In February, Darden phoned Keuper. Darden had discovered that two of BEC's students were black. According to Keuper, Darden told him that blacks were not allowed in the building.⁴⁷ Darden gave Keuper an ultimatum: expel the students or face eviction. Word got back to the students. One of the students, Julius Montgomery, discussed the situation with Keuper. Ultimately, the two black students "volunteered to drop out." Classes continued. "If they hadn't done that," Keuper contended, "the school would have been tossed out on the street. It would have closed the school down."⁴⁸ Darden dropped his threat of immediate eviction and agreed to allow BEC use of the classrooms until June 5.⁴⁹ "After the confrontation," Keuper observed, "we had an unhealthy relationship with Darden and the Brevard School System."⁵⁰ Blacks were regularly admitted to BEC when classes moved to the Methodist Church in September 1959.

Part of the problem may have been that Keuper and Dibble campaigned for local political support in their battle with Darden

45. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard Edition), March 3, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:27.

46. *Miami Herald* (Brevard Edition), March 11, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:28.

47. Keuper, interview.

48. Ibid.

49. *Miami Herald* (Brevard Edition), March 11, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:28.

50. Keuper, interview.

and the school board. On March 9, Keuper appeared before the Titusville City Council to refute Darden's claims. "While all this hubbub about a junior college is going on," Keuper declared, "Eau Gallie is losing a much better college. I may be wrong, but I think this is the largest engineering graduate school in Florida." Instead of recognizing BEC for its accomplishments, the Brevard County School Board and Woodrow Darden "would like to see our college stop its operation." Keuper appealed to the city council members to judge the school's achievements for themselves. Councilman William Woodsan asked Keuper if he wanted the council to try and "dissuade the school board." "No, Sir," Keuper replied, "[a]nd we don't want money: we want moral support."⁵¹

George Shaw and Homer Denius, the founders of Radiation, Inc., which was located in Melbourne, provided Keuper with a solution to Darden's eviction notice.⁵² The previous summer Keuper had contacted Shaw and Denius and asked them to become charter members of BEC's Board of Trustees. Both men supported the idea of forming a college, and Shaw agreed to serve. Denius, however, declined to join the board because of other commitments. Led by Clifford Mattox, president of DBM Corporation at Patrick Air Force Base, BEC's Board of Trustees held its first meeting on February 25 in the midst of the school board controversy.⁵³

Denius and Shaw founded and served as directors of the First National Bank of Melbourne. They, along with BEC trustee and bank president Robert Brown, proposed a solution for the college's classroom problem. The bank owned the building that served as the old Methodist Church on Waverly Place in Mel-

51. *Melbourne Daily Times*, March 10, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:31.

52. Under Denius and Shaws' leadership Radiation, Inc. became one of the preeminent high tech corporations in Florida. Radiation, Inc. is known today as the Harris Corporation.

53. Keuper served as the board's chairman; Dibble was the secretary. Members included: Clifford Mattox, president of DBM Corporation at Patrick Air Force Base (AFB); Garrett Quick; Eau Gallie attorney; George Shaw, vice president, Radiation, Inc.; Melbourne: Ken McLaren, vice president, RCA; B. G. McNabb manager, Convair Astronautics, Patrick AFB; Col. Robert Workman, deputy chief of staff, personnel, Patrick AFB; and C. Robert Brown president of First National Bank. Also J. J. Finnegan, general manager, Port Malabar; Dr. Sam Wright, University of Florida; Norman S. Lund, chairman of joint council of Brevard Chambers of Commerce; Norman Bitterman, director of test engineering at Patrick AFB; Dr. John Sterner, vice president, Cordis Corporation, Miami; and Rev. Alex Boyer, rector Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Melbourne. See *Orlando Sentinel*, December 20, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:60.

bourne. The building was scheduled to be torn down. The bank offered to postpone the demolition and allow BEC use of the building for 1959-60 academic year.⁵⁴

At the faculty dinner meeting on March 18 at the Belcelona Hotel in Melbourne, Keuper announced that Gertrude Martin, a leader in Melbourne Village and secretary for the University of Melbourne at its Country Club Road office, would serve as the school's registrar.⁵⁵ Keuper, however, did not tell the faculty that the school was facing a financial crisis. Many students could not afford to pay for their courses. RCA and the other base contractors had tuition refund and loan programs that paid for college courses. The catch was that the courses had to be taken from accredited colleges and universities. Because BEC was not accredited, students could not apply for tuition support. A grim-faced Bob Kelly, BEC's chief financial officer, who was known for his sense of humor, explained that this was no joking matter. If students did not receive tuition and loan support from their employers, many would not enroll in classes.

Keuper visited the RCA personnel director who told him that there was nothing he could do for BEC so long as the school was not accredited. Keuper recalled that the personnel director suggested that if he did not like the policy he should write to Dr. Robert Sarnoff, president and CEO of RCA, and request a change in company policy. Keuper took him at his word and wrote to Sarnoff.

Fortune intervened in the college's behalf. Apparently, Keuper's letter was lying on Sarnoffs desk when Irving Wolff, RCA's vice president for research, head of Princeton Labs, and chair of the company's education committee, arrived for an appointment. Later, Wolff recounted to Keuper the story of his introduction to BEC. Sarnoff handed the letter to Wolff and asked him what he thought about it. Wolff, who was nearing retirement, decided to visit BEC and investigate the school. A few days later Keuper received a letter informing him that Wolff was on his way. Keuper showed the letter to RCA's leaders at the Cape. They told Keuper that Wolff was his problem.⁵⁶

Keuper picked Wolff up at the Melbourne airport in his 1952 MG convertible. Keuper apologized for not having a fancier car.

54. *Melbourne Daily Times*, March 10, 1959, Scrapbook, 1:31.

55. *Orlando Sentinel* (Brevard Edition), March 19, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:30.

56. Keuper, interview.



Dean Harold L. Dibble holds first graduate Reagan Dubose's diploma as Dubose shakes hands with Brevard Engineering College founder Jerome Keuper. *Photograph courtesy of Florida Institute of Technology Historical Records, Special Collections, Evans Library, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne.*

Wolff, however, was delighted. He loved the convertible and asked if he could drive it. Wolff, who had been a barnstorming pilot in his youth, listened to Keuper describe BEC as they sped across the Melbourne Causeway. Keuper remembered that there was “a good chemistry” between them from the start.⁵⁷ Leaving Melbourne, Wolff told a newspaper reporter that “Brevard Engineering College is contributing significantly to the added education of the engineers and scientists at the Atlantic Missile Range. The initiative and dedication of the college administration and teaching staff is very commendable and is an important factor in the project.”⁵⁸

Wolff wrote a memorandum to Robert Sarnoff when he returned to Princeton. Keuper remembered Wolff's description of the memorandum. Wolff had described the college in glowing terms.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Orlando Evening Star* (Brevard Edition), June 9, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:35.

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BEC was doing a great job for RCA's people at the Cape. Wolff advised Sarnoff to accept BEC's courses for the tuition refund and loan plan.⁵⁹ Sarnoff agreed.

RCA's approval of BEC's courses for the tuition refund and loan program in June 1959 saved the college. AVCO and Aerojet-General announced they would follow RCA's lead and give tuition refunds for BEC's courses. By September 1959, most of the base's contractors had approved the college for their individual tuition loan and refund plans.⁶⁰

Irving Wolff became one of the college's staunchest supporters. In July 1959, Wolff presented BEC with a \$2,400 gift from RCA. "This donation represents an unrestricted grant," Wolff explained, "and is to be used in defraying the operating expenses of the institution. The grant is made now to aid the financing of the college's immediate needs."⁶¹ Wolff invited Keuper to visit him at the Prince-



Brevard Engineering College circa 1960. Photograph courtesy of Florida Institute of Technology Historical Records, Special Collections, Evans Library, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne.

59. Keuper, interview.

60. *Miami Herald* (Brevard Edition), September 1, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:41.

61. *Melbourne Daily Times*, July 26, 1959, in Scrapbook, 1:38.

ton Labs. During one visit to New Jersey, Wolff gave Keuper complete bound sets of the *Physical Review* and *IRE* (Institute of Radio Engineers) journals for BEC's library. On another visit, Wolff told Keuper that he and Sarnoff would donate RCA surplus hardware for the college's labs. Keuper was told to pick out what he wanted and RCA would ship it down. Keuper told the lab director he wanted everything. Wolff ordered that "the barnful of electronics" be loaded onto an eighteen-wheeler and hauled to Florida.⁶²

Classes for the fall semester began on September 21, 1959, at the old Methodist Church in Melbourne. Two hundred and forty-seven students were enrolled for classes. Graduate students outnumbered undergraduates 149 to 98. "They call it Countdown College," G. K. Hodenfield wrote in a nationally syndicated article describing the opening of classes. "The campus," Hodenfield continued, "is a former Methodist Church in Melbourne, but its laboratories are Cape Canaveral and Patrick Air Force Base. The Faculty includes some of the nation's top scientific talent—men who build rockets, fire them, and track them through uncharted space. The student body is a host of eager technicians and graduate engineers engaged in missile work."⁶³ Keuper and his confederates succeeded in starting a college. Their next challenge was finding it a permanent home.

62. Keuper, interview.

63. G. K. Hodenfield, "Countdown College," *Florida Magazine*, October 11, 1959, 12-G, in Scrapbook, 1:45.