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## Technical know-how

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Don Garrison is a firm believer in fate. How else could he describe the turn of events that led him to Furman and ultimately to a 32-year tenure as president of one of the largest technical colleges in South Carolina?

A baseball and football star at Liberty (S.C.) High School in the early 1950s, Garrison grew up in a textile mill village and saw sports as a ticket to improving his lot in life. During his senior year, the 6-2, 215-pound catcher was offered \$3,000 to join the Boston Braves. But Clemson University came courting, and his mother insisted that he take the scholarship.

The Tigers, however, were also recruiting Billy Odell, a future major league pitcher from Newberry High School. With the recruiting process winding down, Odell threw the Tigers a curve, announcing that he would attend Clemson only if his friend and high school catcher could join him.

When Clemson decided to sign Odell's friend, a crushed Garrison was left without a scholarship. Soon, though, the University of Georgia offered him a football scholarship, and he was preparing to pack for Athens when his pastor, Mac Bryan, told him that he "needed to go to Furman, a good Baptist school."

Although Furman had not recruited Garrison, Bryan talked with football coach Bill Young. Soon thereafter, Young offered Garrison the opportunity to win a scholarship during preseason drills.

"I went to Furman on faith and a prayer," says Garrison, who retired this summer after more than three decades as president of Tri-County Technical College in Pendleton, S.C.

The hard-nosed, broad-shouldered fullback impressed Young, but the coach could not find the scholarship money. After the second week of practice, he called Garrison into his office.

"He told me that he wasn't able to find anyone to pay for the scholarship. Then he told me to call my parents to come pick me up," says Garrison, whose father was disabled and whose family could not afford college tuition. "My heart was broken, and I started crying on the phone with my mom. Well, Coach interrupted me and told me to hang in there for one more week of practice to see if he could come up with anything."

Young eventually found a donor to pay for Garrison's schooling. Garrison went on to play baseball and football as a freshman and sophomore, but two football injuries — a dislocated elbow and bulging disk — prevented him from playing his last two years.

Garrison, who ultimately earned a doctorate from Duke University, admits that he was a below-average student at Furman. At one point he almost had to withdraw, and in 1954 Dean Francis Bonner gave him an ultimatum.

"He told me that if I made one more 'D' I would be gone," recalls Garrison, who heeded Bonner's warning, hit the books and graduated in 1956 with a B.A. degree in education.

After Furman, Garrison wanted to become an airplane pilot. But his football injuries conspired against him, and he failed the physical.

With his career plans sidetracked, Garrison returned home and did what felt natural: He began teaching and coaching football at Pendleton High School. He later earned a master's in education from Furman and became a local celebrity in 1965 when he coached



CHARLES H. JORDAN

**Don Garrison's 32-year career as president of Tri-County Tech ended July 31.**

Palmetto High School, a team that had won just a handful of games the previous five years, to the upper state championship game.

Garrison's move into higher education came in 1963 when he received a call from Thomas Barton, an old friend and coaching colleague. Barton was (and still is) president of Greenville Tech, one of 13 technical schools founded in the early 1960s as part of a statewide effort to train workers and attract industry. Barton wanted Garrison to direct the school's evening studies program.

Not wanting to disappoint his friend, Garrison reluctantly took the job but continued to teach and coach during the day.

Garrison soon came to understand and then embrace the role of technical colleges, with their emphasis on job training and economic growth. In 1966, he joined Greenville Tech full time and played a leading role in developing its health careers center. Two years later he earned his doctorate from Duke, and in 1971 he was named president of Tri-County Tech.

The school was struggling when Garrison signed on, but his fund-raising efforts soon helped bring Tri-County into the black. Within a year, the school had developed a plan to bolster its curriculum, add programs and facilities, and improve instruction.

With Garrison at the helm, Tri-County has grown from three buildings covering 89,000 square feet to 14 buildings covering 389,828 square feet. Enrollment has jumped from 919 to more than 18,000 degree-seeking and continuing education students.

As Mendel Stewart, chair of the school's governing board, said when Garrison announced his decision to retire, "He has been a dynamic leader whose profound impact on the college's direction during these three-plus decades has resulted in financial stability, outstanding facilities, enrollment growth and maximum community service."

A recent editorial in the *Anderson Independent-Mail* even called Garrison a "legend."

"Without him, technical education in this state wouldn't be such an asset, nor its current quality, in our tri-county area," said the paper. "His coaching of the public and lawmakers to support Tri-County Tech (and his constant and fervent support of the technical college system in South Carolina) both paid off, but not for the coach — for the team, the citizens of South Carolina."

Although Garrison continues to do some work on behalf of Tri-County Tech, he and his wife, Carol, a retired teacher, look forward to having more time to travel and dote on their grandchildren — and on each other.

And there's another to-do item on his less-cluttered day-timer: find out who gave him that scholarship more than 50 years ago.

"Furman gave me such a great education, and I'm so grateful to the person that provided that scholarship," he says. "I never found out who gave the money. I've always wondered. I want to find them and thank them. At the very least I can thank their family. I hope I can find them."

— John Roberts