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# Ouachita through My Eyes: The Last Lecture of Joe Jeffers

Joe Jeffers  
*Ouachita Baptist University*

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## Ouachita Through My Eyes The Last Lecture of Joe Jeffers

April 24, 2017



Just what is Ouachita? It's us, it's our students, and, most importantly, it's the interactions that take place among us. Yes, we have a shared commitment to a liberal arts education within a Christian context. Yes, we want to give our students and one another the love, the drive, and a zeal for learning. Yes, we want to be the best instructors possible, a goal that can only be attained by continued improvement in both the craft of pedagogy and by pushing the envelope in our respective disciplines.

From my vantage point in the natural sciences, I consider the liberal arts character of the University crucial to a proper learning environment. If it weren't here, I wouldn't be either. What do I expect for natural science students? Yes, I want them to take as much science as possible. But I also want them to take additional courses in whatever parts of the traditional liberal arts arena that most fascinates them. I want them to be exposed to other ways of seeing and criticizing than we may provide in the sciences. The more diverse their views, the better thinkers they become. I want them to see the beauty inherent in a painting by Van Gogh, a score by Mozart, a poem by Eliot. Then I want them to see a similar beauty in a theory by Einstein, a writing by Darwin, an idea by Pauling. To top it all off, I want them to see that same

beauty in nature, in the function of a living system, in the structure of a lily pad, in the colors of fall.

We must engage our students where they are and help them reach the goals they set for themselves. It's not easy. In my forty-five years as a Ouachita professor, I've seen a gradual decline in the level of preparation students bring to Ouachita from their high school experiences. They are as bright as ever, but they do not come to us with the same organization and study skills as they once did. I would argue it's not their fault. The demands placed on them by secondary education are, for the most part, less rigorous these days. Stop and think about it. Their task is much more difficult than was ours. They have to develop organization and study skills *after* they enter college. Most of them have rarely studied more than an hour for an exam in high school. We had several years of pre-college rigor – three to six – depending on the particular school and the era when we came through. I relate the difference by comparing two nineteen-year-olds, one who grew up on a farm in Arkansas, another who grew up in New York City. The Arkansas kid has been driving something motorized since his or her legs were long enough to reach the pedals. The New York kid just took driver's ed. Which one do you think is the better driver? Now, let's fast forward to age twenty-three. The New York kid moved out of the city into an area where driving is a daily occurrence. What's the difference in their driving skills now? Probably not much. To bring the analogy back home, our current students have to learn the study and organization skills in four years that we had seven or more years to learn. By graduation we must have them at the same level of development as we did 25 years ago. Their job is harder. We have to help them. Add the level of distractions today compared to yesterday and the task is even more onerous.

But I digress. Where did Ouachita begin for me? We brought my brother Bob to enroll at Ouachita as I was an incipient eighth-grader.



Joe Jeffers in 1957

I immediately fell in love with the place. The buzz, the excitement was palpable as freshmen and returning students converged on the campus and into the dorms. Hugs, shared summer experiences, different backgrounds were all so refreshing to this twelve-year-old, who had never been beyond a neighboring state. The world was opening up. While my brother's tenure at Ouachita was short lived, the seed had been planted. Even my dad's economic pressure to attend Arkansas A&M (now UA-Monticello), then the University of Arkansas, did not dissuade me. So, in September of 1962, I made my own entrance.

Okay, as a 6'2" 128-pound freshman, I did not exactly make a grand entrance. As my high school physics teacher, Mr. Cooper, told me, "Joe Jeffers, you would have to run around in the shower to get wet." Here, I will relate a story I wrote for *The Signal* last spring.

It was the fall of 1962. Fifteen hundred students had descended on Ouachita Baptist College, including 500 freshmen. One of these freshmen – let's call him Joe – was excited to be at college. The Baptist Student Union invited all students to join the BSU choir, which met on Wednesday nights. Joe enjoyed singing, so he went to the basement of Mitchell Hall Music Conservatory for the first meeting. While they were waiting for the rehearsal, a beautiful young lady began a conversation with Joe. Joe was thrilled, of course, because he was so shy around women he would never have initiated the conversation. After rehearsal they talked more.

Joe did not see her during the ensuing week, but there she was at the next week's choir rehearsal. They renewed their conversation. But Joe did not know her name. By this time they had talked so much he was too embarrassed to ask her name. No worries, he thought. He would find out her name soon enough. Then, the unexpected happened. She deftly maneuvered the conversation to have him ask her out for Friday night. It was a great outcome for Joe because he was far too shy to ask her out directly. He left rehearsal on cloud nine. Uh-oh. He still did not know her name. She told him she lived in Terrell-Moore dorm first floor, but that was all the information he had.

This early in the semester Joe did not know many people, mostly the guys on his dorm floor and some of the students with whom he went to class. He asked around on Thursday, trying to find out her name. No luck. The search continued into Friday, still with no answer. Friday at 3:00 was ROTC drill, mandatory in those days. At drill, Joe found a fellow who *thought* her name might be Mary. Mary. At least there was a chance.

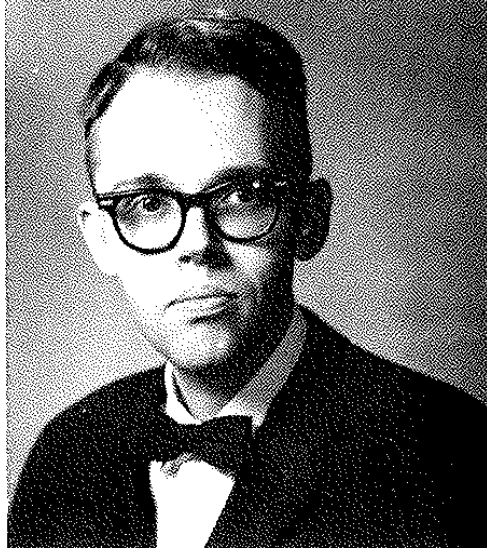


Mary

At the appointed hour, Joe went to Terrell-Moore in search of "Mary." The technology of the day was a buzzer system. Each girl's name was on a list beside a buzzer. For example, Lucy Brown was two longs and two shorts – bzzzzzzzz, bzzzzzzzz, bzz, bzz. Joe searched the list for a Mary. Much to his chagrin, there were *three* Marys. Panic. No, wait. Necessity is the mother of invention, as the old saying goes. Joe buzzed all three Marys. If, indeed, Mary was the correct name, Joe figured the other two Marys wouldn't know him from Adam's off ox. Sure enough, three young ladies came to the lobby. Fortunately, among them was Joe's Mary. They smiled at each other and left arm in arm, leaving behind two other rather perplexed Marys. Joe still had the task of determining which of the three last names was Mary's. But that was a puzzle for another time. Life was good.

Those of you who know me now would probably not describe me as shy. But, once upon a time...

Humor is the best medicine. The stories we remember best are often the amusing ones. When I was a freshman, we had to wear beanies. And yes, we had to kowtow to upper classmen. At the beginning of my sophomore year, I was visiting a friend in O. C. Bailey. His room was the first one near the end door. All of a sudden the door opened and I saw what for all the world looked like a ninth grader. "Freshman!" I exclaimed as I arose to haze my very first victim. My friend grabbed my arm and said, "No, no, no! That's Dr. Nisbet, the new chemistry professor."



Dr. Alex Nisbet

He really did look like a ninth grader.

During the time West Hall was being constructed, a group of merry malcontents in Northwest Hall were having a less than pleasant tête-à-tête with the dorm mom in Northwest. One Saturday morning, Mom May opened her corridor door to find a cinder block wall built in front of it. Later that weekend, I encountered one of the would-be perpetrators and made the comment, “Bill, understand that I have no idea who built that wall in front of Mom May’s door, but I was surprised that whoever built it didn’t use any mortar.” Bill retorted, “Jeffers, understand that I don’t know who built it either, but I imagine that whoever built it looked for some.”

One final student story and I promise to move on. In the olden days, biological supply houses did not sell cats with latex-filled veins and arteries as they do now. It was up to the individual students in Comparative Anatomy to procure their own specimens, usually stray cats around Arkadelphia. The day arrived when each student had his or her cat laid out and ready to begin the dissection. Dr. J. R. Mundie, chair of biology and instructor for the course, walked through the door, hesitated aghast, and exclaimed in his best Virginia accent, “Wuh, wuh, that’s my cat!” Years after that practice ceased, the biology department received calls any time someone’s cat was missing.

After five and a half years at Purdue, I returned to Ouachita in January 1972 as a newly minted Ph.D. Yes, I know it’s only supposed to take four years, but that interval is a rarity in the sciences. The first week of the semester, we had a major water leak in Hamilton Moses, as the science building was known then. Joe Nix and I were mopping up water in the hallway when Nix said, “Welcome to having a Ph.D.” Joe Nix was my major mentor at Ouachita.



Joe Nix with Steve Gonzales

He taught me the value of involvement in faculty governance, the importance of speaking up when critical issues were at hand, and, most importantly, of being active. Almost everyone has good ideas, but if one doesn't act on them, they are of little value.



Two Joes

Nix was prone to shenanigans.

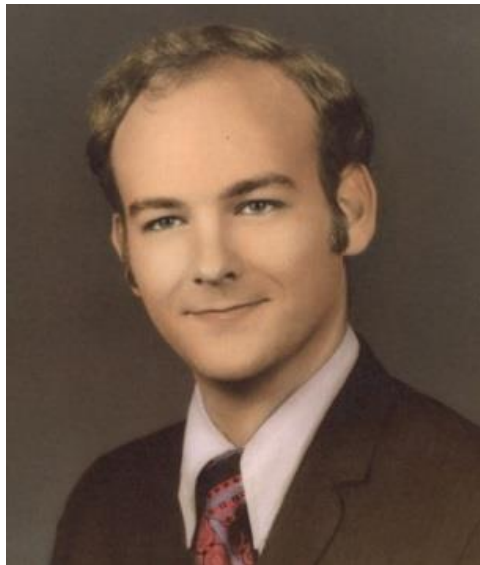
I had many other mentors in my early years – Everett Slavens and Lavell Cole in history, Herman Sandford and Betty McCommas in English, Carl Goodson and Vester Wolber in religion, and Charles Wesley in music. The overarching message from all of them was the importance of

people and the value of conversations across disciplines, of being part of a liberal arts faculty. Mentors can be younger too. No one epitomizes the Renaissance Man better than Randall Wight.



Randall Wight in lecture

Ray Granade and I were supposed to begin our Ouachita journey together in the fall of 1971. Neither of us had finished our dissertations. Ray came on.



Ray Granade c. 1972

I begged off for another semester to finish. Ray has been a most important colleague to me. An excellent wordsmith, he has always had the right thing to say, a superb sense of integrity, and a wit that keeps us all on our toes, often without saying a word.



I struggled with the appropriate level of demand to expect of students. It is easy to come in from graduate school with expectations too high. Still, I know students will meet expectations, so I wanted the bar high enough. I will relate two conversations I had with Jim Hart, one of my first students in organic chemistry.



Jim Hart c. 1972

Jim was an excellent student, in the habit of making As. After the first exam, he approached me with a rather belligerent tone and said, "I didn't study six hours to make 60." I replied, "Mr. Hart, just think what you'd have made if you'd studied 10 hours." He did a slow burn and walked off. A couple of weeks later, he approached me again, this time saying, "Organic is not the only course I have, you know." The implication was clear that I was demanding too much. I said, "Mr. Hart. I want you to do something. For one week, keep track of your goof-off time, come back to me, and we'll have conversation." I really didn't expect him to do it. I was mostly getting him off of my back. A week later, he came up and said, "I did what you said. You'll never hear me complain again." He never told me the total goof-off hours, but he also did not make a grade lower than 93 the rest of the term.

The most gratifying outcome I've had in forty-five years of teaching organic chemistry is watching students grapple with developing the organization and study skills necessary to master logical pattern recognition. They do become good students. I'll help them in any way I can, except take the exam for them, of course. I'm personable with them, I let them know I have their best interests at heart, but I'm here to be their mentor, not their buddy. Friendships do develop and, after graduation, those friendships are free to flourish, as many have.



In Organic Chemistry, it is heartening to watch the light bulbs go off as students reach the stage where they see the concepts. Okay, Johnny Wink called me on saying “light bulbs go off”. Shouldn’t it be “light bulbs go on”? Technically, Johnny’s right. But I grew up with the other expression when someone reaches understanding or has a sudden insight, so I’ll stick with it.

I loved teaching non-science majors too. It was fun to have a classroom full of students who would rather be anywhere other than in science class and see if I could turn them on to science. I used a social impact approach. I wanted them to have a foundation for those issues that educated citizens need to know to be active and informed. A few alumni of that experience are among our colleagues – Brian McKinney, Joey Dodson, and Sherry Phelps. Yes, they’re warped, but it’s not my fault. A particular student, Jennifer Smith, comes to mind.



Jennifer Smith Steeger

Jennifer sat on the front row in Life Science. All period, every period, she sat there bouncing her right leg up and down, up and down, dissipating nervous energy, I assume. Jennifer enjoyed the course enough that she became a biology major. So, I had her in Organic 1, Organic 2, and

Biochemistry. Yes, you guessed it. She sat on the front row in each of those classes and bounced that leg up and down, all period, every period. She is now a pediatrician.

I do have an off-beat sense of humor. I'm a quipper. Language is so much fun with double entendres, puns, and other word play.



There is an old fellow called Joe  
Whose punning wit gladdens me so  
That I'm wont to rejoice  
And clamor, "James Joyce  
Has returned to us,  
but now he's Joe!"

– Johnny Wink (2016)



Limerick by Johnny Wink

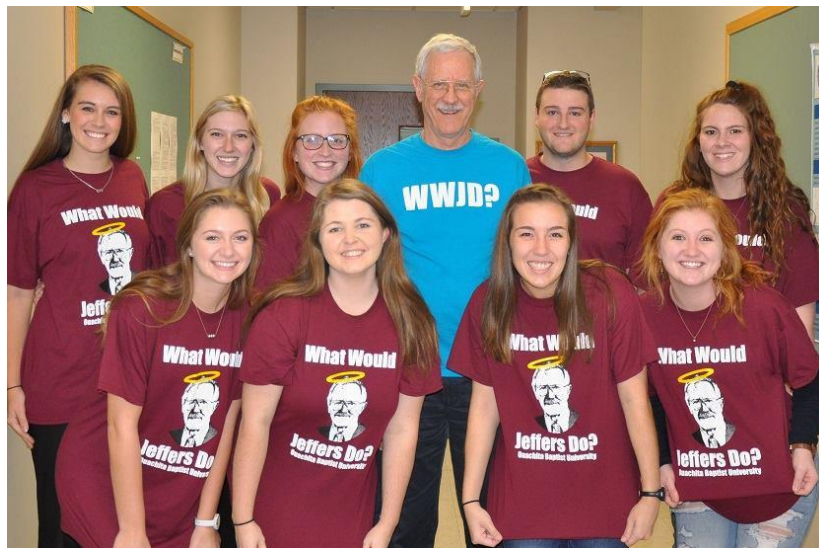
Students, of course, are constantly throwing up "soft balls", easy to knock out of the park. But they like it. Humor is often noted in my course evaluations. It also promotes relationships, and that's most important for engaging students and letting them know I care. That repartee is what I will miss most in retirement.

Students give as good as they get. Here's Ronny Yowell's measure of revenge.



Ronny Yowell cartoon in *The Signal*

I love my students. Each year the chemistry students design a T-shirt to wear at the American Chemical Society spring national meeting. This year's shirt is a reprise of one from several years ago.



*What Would Jeffers Do? T-shirts for ACS students*

I'm wearing the old one; they're wearing the new one.

The banter doesn't stop with students. History professor Lavell Cole liked to goad me about organic students. We were walking down the big sidewalk headed toward the student center one day when Lavell said, "Jeffers, I have this new advisee who came in with an ACT of 12. I put her in Organic. Is that okay?" I said, "Cole, do realize for 10 bonus points in Organic, I could have you disappear from the face of the earth?" About that time an Organic student overtook us from behind and said, "I'll do it for five." Cole replied, "Point taken."

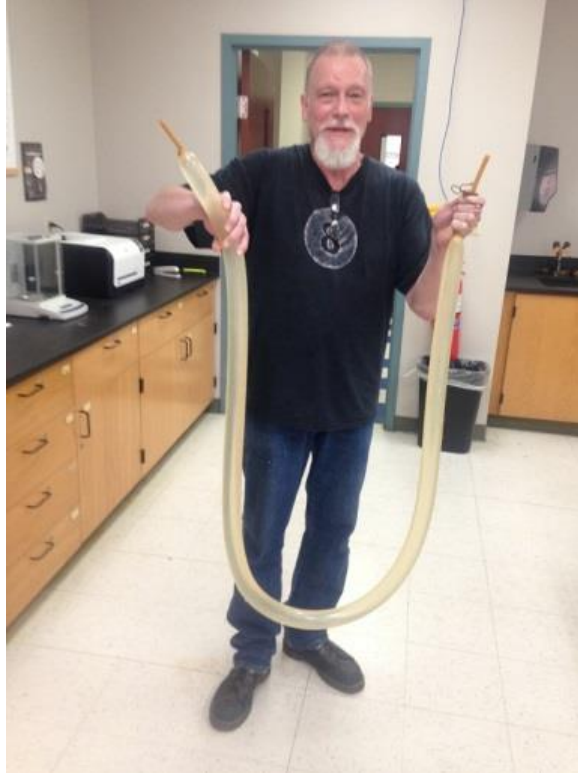
A tradition started the first semester I was at Ouachita – the annual Organic Water fight. During those days, I gave the final big organic exam the last Thursday of the regular term, during lab time. The Friday class afterward was intended for information about the American Chemical Society Exam that would serve as the final exam. That review never happened. Instead, we had a water fight. Buckets, beakers, water weenies, whatever would hold water was used. What started as the class versus me quickly developed into a free-for-all with everyone against everyone else. In the end, we were all soaked to the gills. A student photographer took the following photo during one year's water fight.



Organic water fight

The AP wire picked it up and it went worldwide.

One additional instance comes to mind. I walked into the lecture room on the appointed day and every student was sitting at his or her desk with a water weenie ready to go.



Harrell Beckwith with water weenie from 30-inch latex tubing

Little did they know that water weenies have a finite lifetime. Too much pressure. So, I started lecturing. Pavlovian dogs that they were, they began taking notes. About three minutes into the lecture, three of the water weenies burst in quick succession. Pop! Pop! Pop! Lecture over. The water fight was on! Alas, age and back issues caught up with me. The last water fight was in 1996. While the water fight itself was great, it took a month for me to recover. I decided it was time to retire from the water fight. My daughter Teri was very upset. She grew up hearing about the water fight, and here I was discontinuing it two years before she was to take Organic. C'est la vie!

In the early 1980s, a group of us faculty, male faculty, as Caroline Cagle repeatedly pointed out, began a tradition of going away for a weekend retreat, hiking, eating, and solving the world's problems. After an economic downturn in 1983, Ouachita had a belt tightening that led to pink slips for several untenured faculty. It had to be done. No one argued with that. But the style of the Vice-President of Academic Affairs made the experience more unpleasant than it should have been, and that ruffled a few feathers. A Ouachita Board member asked Vice-President for Administration, Ed Coulter, how the faculty was taking it. Ed said that, except for a few soreheads, the faculty was okay. Soreheads! The retreat group gladly took up the name, and, this past January, we had the 36<sup>th</sup> annual Sorehead Retreat. Here's a coterie of Soreheads from some years ago.



Randall Wight, Joe Jeffers, Lavell Cole, Johnny Wink, Herman Sandford

And a closer look at the official Sorehead T-shirt insignia.



Sorehead. It's in the genes.

I have served with five OBU presidents, six counting my student days.



Ralph Phelps



Dan Grant



Ben Elrod



Andy Westmoreland



Rex Horne



Ben Sells

Ouachita Presidents during Jeffers' tenure

Dan Grant was president when I was hired and for the first fifteen years of my tenure. Daniel is a good sport. On a January when Arkadelphia received a significant snowfall all four Wednesdays of the month, resulting, of course, in the canceling of Wednesday night church services all month, we chided our colleagues in religion saying it was the Lord's message that they should focus on Sundays, not Wednesdays. During one of those Wednesdays, Joe Nix and I made big snow balls and went up to Dan Grant's office looking to hit and run. Alas, he was not in his office. But, there he sat in the doorway of Ed Coulter's office, conveniently with his back to us. We each unloaded a snowball on Dan's head and ran like ... uh ... the hot place. He wrote a column in the next week's Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine entitled "Christian Vengeance in a Snowball Fight". Nix and I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

In 1974, Everett Slavens in history and I had a lunch conversation discussing how we could share our professional enthusiasm across campus. Out of that talk Faculty Colloquium developed. It struggled at first, with an attendance of 10-12 persons for each monthly meeting. Dan Grant took an interest and became a regular attendee. Because of his presence, many other faculty members joined us, and now, 42 years later, it is an institution. Dan Grant, I might add, is still a regular attendee.

Another milestone occurred in 1974. Ouachita provided me with my wife. Charlotte Williams, a University of Kentucky graduate in psychology, came to Ouachita to take courses for her teaching credentials.





Joe and Charlotte Jeffers on wedding day

We married in 1974 at Albert Pike on the bank of the Little Missouri River. Philosophy and Religion Professor Jim Berryman did the honors. Charlotte subsequently earned her Master's degree at OBU.

We have two children, Teri and Charlie, both physicians in Little Rock, shown here at Charlie's UAMS graduation with Teri and son-in-law Toby Vancil.



Toby Vancil, Teri Jeffers Vancil, Charlie Jeffers 2015

Charlie and his wife Brandi also married at Albert Pike – with Byron Eubanks officiating. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree.

When the kids were small, we spent a summer in King of Prussia, PA, while I worked in the Department of Molecular Genetics at SmithKline and French Laboratories. Some of my colleagues there razzed me about being in rural Arkansas where the only entertainment was watching paint dry. I asked them how often they went into Philadelphia to cultural events. They replied once or maybe twice a year. After all, it is a 25-mile drive into the city, baby sitters are expensive, and tickets are pricey, as is parking. I replied that we had more music, theater, and art opening events than one had time to attend, and that I went to at least one event every month *and* took my kids. There are advantages to campus life.

For the first ten years of my tenure at OBU, I sat in on a class every semester or participated in a performing group.



## Verbatim Reader's Theatre

Members of Verbatim are (Left, Back Row) Bob Belshan, Susan Henley, Joe Jeffers, Rasmond Caldwell, Gene Vestal, Earl Coleman, Susan Coppenger, Pat Turner, Janice Perceful, Jim Danner, Camilla Ellis. (Front Row) Jeanie Wesley, Jon Grafton, Renee Vincent and Joe Cantu.

Among them were Verbatim with Raymond Caldwell, French with Jack Estes, Spanish with David Anderson, Modern Drama with Betty McCommas, Educational Research with Charles Chambliss, and Philosophy of Religion with Jim Berryman. The people were as important as their subject matter. They broadened my horizons, and the effort demonstrated to my students the importance of the liberal arts. With two young children, life got in the way of that practice. I hope to reengage next fall.

With the increased professionalism of our newer faculty, the need to develop opportunities for research became more and more apparent. Joe Nix had a thriving water research program, attracting in excess of \$7,000,000 during his tenure. Wayne Everett and I had small research grants from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, respectively, and Tim Knight had some contract work, but OBU had no systematic program for research. In 2000, we had conversations with alumni Mr. Virgil Waggoner and Dr. J.D. Patterson about funding a small summer undergraduate research program, which they did. At the end of that summer, Tim Knight and I were discussing ways to allow our students to share their enthusiasm for summer research with the campus. Tim had visited SUNY-Binghamton in upstate New York, and they had a Scholars Day. We decided to try it at OBU. We didn't want it limited to science students, so we invited the campus to participate in the first Scholars Day in 2001. After a second year of organizing and sponsoring Scholars Day, we invited the Carl Goodson Honors Program, at that time under the direction of Byron Eubanks, to take it over. The Honors Program has done a magnificent job with Scholars Day, which will be celebrating its 17<sup>th</sup> annual session on Wednesday of this week.



Cat Williams, presenting her Honors Thesis work at Scholars day 2016

Cat took a gap year this year and is headed to the University of Memphis as a graduate student this fall.



Dusty Barnett explaining his research to Jacob Lively at Scholars Day 2012

Jacob Lively graduated from the University of Arkansas School of Law and now works for a Little Rock law firm. Dusty Barnett is a Ph.D. student at UAMS.

Dr. Patterson became so enamored with the OBU summer research program that he funded it out-of-pocket for several years until he had set up an endowment to keep it going indefinitely. It is now named for him, the J.D. Patterson Summer Undergraduate Research Program.

That first-year jump into summer research put us in perfect position to become one of the seven undergraduate institutions in Arkansas to be included in the National Institute of Health-sponsored Biomedical Research Infrastructure Network or BRIN program administered through the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. The BRIN program morphed into Arkansas INBRE, IDeA Networks of Biomedical Research Infrastructure, and has supported several of our faculty members – Tim Hayes, Lori Hensley, Marty Perry, Nathan Reyna, and Ruth Plymale – with research funding and release time, has provided us with start-up funds for new faculty, and has awarded us competitive funding for instrument purchase. To date, OBU has received more than \$3,000,000 from these NIH programs.

The research program has flourished. All B.S. students in biology and chemistry do a research project as part of their degrees. To date, more than 200 OBU students have had summer undergraduate research experiences at Ouachita. Many others conduct research during semesters. We have also had students accepted into Summer Undergraduate Research Programs at universities all over the region and as far away as Stanford and Albert-Ludwigs-University in Freiburg, Germany. Accolades have rained upon us from those endeavors. Lori Hensley and her students have been selected three times to attend the Council on

Undergraduate Research Posters on the Hill event. In a typical year 70 or so proposals from about 800 submissions are invited to come to Washington, DC, to present their research to Congressmen and Senators. Ruth Plymale and her students were invited last year.



Ruth Plymale, John Givler, and Heidi Hughes at 2016 Posters on the Hill

John Givler is bound for the Arkansas College of Osteopathic Medicine, and Heidi Hughes is a medical student at UAMS.

For a period of four years (2013-2016), the American Chemical Society sponsored a Speak Simply competition, where students were challenged to present their research posters in a clear concise method avoiding the use of jargon. ACS gave 15 national awards each year. OBU students won 18 of the 60 awards given in that four-year period. No other institution was even close.



Emily Harris, Rachel Tucker, Jessica Compton, and Nathan Hall  
2016 Speak Simply winners

We were disappointed when ACS discontinued the competition this year. Last year Rachel Tucker and Nathan Hall became two-time winners. Emily Harris is bound for physician assistant school at UAMS, Rachel and Jessica Compton are in UAMS pharmacy school, and Nathan is bound for medical school at UAMS.

In 2015 and 2016, OBU students brought home the Collaborative Research Award, the top award at the Alpha Chi National Honorary Society annual meeting. That competition requires three students with three different majors to collaborate.



Stoni Butler, Jace Bradshaw, and Rebekah Davis  
at 2016 Alpha Chi National Honorary Society meeting

Stoni Butler, a psychology major is a PhD student at Ohio State; Jace Bradshaw, a biology, chemistry, and physics triple major is headed to UAMS College of Medicine; and Rebekah Davis, a biology major is a medical student at UAMS. Watching the undergraduate research program grow and thrive has been very gratifying.

President Rex Horne began a modest program to extend funded research to other OBU undergraduates, and President Ben Sells has been talking the necessity of providing a unique undergraduate experience for all OBU students.

The forty-five-plus-year ride has been fun. Friends have so enriched the experience. We've laughed together; we've cried together; we've supported one another; we've learned from each other. I could start naming more of them – Missy Archer, Glenn Good, Tom Greer, Raouf Halaby, George Keck – but the list is so long. You know who you are. I treasure the experiences we have had together. Of course there have been ups and downs. That's life. I can honestly say I never once thought about coming to my *job* at Ouachita. It's what I do; it's who I am. Now I am faced with the task of reinventing myself.



McCoy Jeffers, future scientist 2017

Perhaps I can spend time working with the next generation of scientists.  
Thank you for your kind attention.