1971–1980: The Mayer Years

By Spencer Elliott

There was not much to envy about Richard S. Mayer’s situation as new dean of the College of Engineering in 1971. He assumed a position through which several others had been shuffled during the years preceding. Ohio University had been forced to shut down briefly just a year before. Mayer’s College was facing severe budget problems. And soon, there would be talk of eliminating it altogether.

“Circumstances of the University were grave,” President Emeritus Charles Ping recalls. “But it was a campus rich in people.”

It was also a campus of fewer people. Social upheaval in the wake of the Kent State shootings had led to a major drop in enrollment, leaving the University cash-strapped and forced to make difficult financial decisions. The College of Engineering was a target for cutbacks, and some University administrators had even proposed the program be discontinued entirely, much to the consternation of those within.

“The battles at that time were about budgets,” says Nick Dinos, professor emeritus of chemical engineering. “Dick had to deal with a lot of hostility.”

Paul Stocker, B.S.E.E. ’26, HON ’74, then a Russ College board member, would eventually write to the Board of Trustees in 1974 expressing his discontent.

Though the College would lose much of its non-tenured faculty, Dick McFarland, B.S. ’50, director emeritus of the Avionics Engineering Center, notes that Mayer kept the ship afloat with what he had.

“He was in the trenches, trying to do more with less,” McFarland says.

Weathering the storm of those turbulent years, Mayer saw to it that the College of Engineering not only survived—he helped lay the groundwork that would help it thrive.

“Dick managed to hold the College together and on task during difficult years,” says Ping.

But Mayer downplays his role.

“You have to take some wise action. It’s not a dream world, it’s a real world,” he says. “You realize the whole University has a problem, even if your share is disproportionately large,” he notes.