Adron Doran, who relied on his experience in politics and religion to guide Morehead State University through a period of unprecedented growth, died yesterday at University of Kentucky Hospital. Mr. Doran, president of MSU from 1954 through 1977 -- nearly four times longer than any of his predecessors -- was 92.

When Mr. Doran became president, Morehead had about 700 students. At the time of his retirement, that figure had risen to more than 7,000.

The school's budget grew from $820,000 in 1954-55 to $15.3 million in 1970-71. More than $55 million was spent on capital construction, and the number of faculty and staff members jumped from 91 to 747. Morehead, like other Kentucky schools of higher learning, went from being a state college to a regional university.

To some people, MSU's seventh president was an iron-fisted leader who had little patience with those who questioned his authority. There were squabbles with faculty and student groups; they charged that the former four-term state legislator and Kentucky House speaker ran the university as a dictator. To other Morehead students, the Church of Christ minister with the trademark bow tie was a father figure.

"He had a major, major impact on my life," said Lexington lawyer and former state Democratic Party Chairman Terry McBrayer, a Morehead graduate who became close friends with Mr. Doran and his wife, Mignon Doran.

Mr. Doran, McBrayer said, was directly responsible for McBrayer getting a full scholarship to the University of Louisville law school. McBrayer said that Mr. Doran, calling in a political marker, got U of L's president to grant McBrayer the first full scholarship to the law school.

Later, when McBrayer was on the verge of dropping out of law school, Mignon Doran gave him the encouragement he needed to continue, he said.

McBrayer said he was just one of many students that the Dorans have helped.

"On the one hand, they didn't have any children. On the other hand, they had thousands of kids," McBrayer
Mr. Doran knew MSU students' names, their hometowns and their parents' names. Students from remote parts of Eastern Kentucky learned not only academic skills, but social skills under the leadership of Mr. Doran and his wife, McBrayer said.

"Chief executives today spend a lot of time raising funds. He raised kids. He taught them manners, discipline, character, responsibility, leadership -- those types of things. The fund-raising was secondary."

Said former Kentucky Gov. Edward T. Breathitt: "Adron Doran opened the door for opportunity and better lives for thousands of Kentuckians."

Mr. Doran and Eastern Kentucky University President Robert Martin, a former state superintendent of public instruction, helped shape important decisions affecting Kentucky's colleges and universities from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. They presented a united front for the regional universities' interests. Their departures from the college scene in the mid-1970s marked the end of an era in Kentucky higher education.

Their critics called them empire builders, contending that their philosophy was that bigger was better. Both of their campuses had explosive growth during their tenures.

"If by empire-building they mean comfortable facilities for a youngster to sleep in, a university center that provides recreation and an opportunity to eat good food, a classroom, a laboratory or a good gymnasium -- if that is an empire, then I rejoice in having that in my vision and I have no apologies for it," Mr. Doran said shortly before his retirement.

After taking the $8,500-a-year job at Morehead, Mr. Doran took his plans for improving the school to the public, speaking at clubs and high school commencements. Soon, new buildings were seen at Morehead and other colleges across the state. Baby boomers began crowding the campuses.

"He was a towering figure in Eastern Kentucky at the time when college enrollments there and across the state started exploding in the boom of the post-war period," said Dick Wilson, who attended Morehead while Mr. Doran was president and covered higher education as a reporter for The Courier-Journal.

"It really was a dramatic story -- the kind of thing that probably couldn't happen today," said Ray Hornback, a former MSU and University of Kentucky vice president.

Mr. Doran's efforts at Morehead brought him national acclaim.

In 1971, he received the Horatio Alger Award, joining a select group of about 200 Americans. He was the fourth Kentuckian so honored. Horatio Alger awards, sponsored by the American Schools and Colleges Association, were created to honor business and professional leaders who have attained success despite humble circumstances.
Mr. Doran also received the Lincoln Key of the Kentucky Education Association for integration without fanfare. Gov. Edward T. Breathitt selected him for the Distinguished Kentuckian Award in 1966. Morehead named its student center for Mr. Doran in 1959. An endowed faculty chair in educational leadership was established by alumni and former colleagues to mark his 90th birthday, in 1999.

Mr. Doran was born Sept. 1, 1909, near Boydsville in Graves County, 100 yards north of the Tennessee line, one of six sons of Edward Conway and Mary Elizabeth Clemons Doran. Mr. Doran's first name was an anagram of the letters in his last name.

He walked 5 miles to attend his first eight grades of school.

His family moved to Cuba, also in Graves County. His principal, Alonzo Williams, was a Church of Christ minister. Williams guided Mr. Doran to Freed-Hardeman Junior College in Henderson, Tenn.

Mr. Doran received bachelor's and master's degrees from Murray State College.

He taught social studies, coached basketball and was principal of three Kentucky high schools -- Boaz, Sylvan Shade and Wingo -- early in his career.

In 1943, he was elected to the first of four terms in the Kentucky House of Representatives.

In the House, Mr. Doran was aligned with Harry Lee Waterfield, a fellow Western Kentuckian and a friend since their college days at Murray. Waterfield later became lieutenant governor.

"He was a lifelong friend of my parents -- he and Mignon both," said Harry Lee Waterfield Jr., president of Investors Heritage Life Insurance Co.

Mr. Doran moved to Lexington in 1948 to study for his doctorate at UK. He also preached at Nicholasville Church of Christ after his move to Central Kentucky. At the time he became Morehead's president, he was pastor of the Church of Christ at Lancaster.

Mr. Doran didn't mind being known as a strong university president.

"I make no apology for dedicating myself in the face of fires, storms and high waters to making Morehead State University one of the outstanding regional universities in the nation," he said in 1976.

"Never has the leadership role of university president been challenged more greatly than today. This is no time for the summer soldier and the sunshine patriot, but one for those who have strong hearts, tall frames, tough skins and indomitable wills to rise up from among the brethren," he said.

After retirement, he lectured and was a minister to several Church of Christ congregations. He wrote

Mr. Doran is survived by his wife, Mignon Louise McClain Doran, whom he married in 1931.

Arrangements were pending at Northcutt & Son Home for Funerals in Morehead.

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Herald-Leader education writer Steve Lannen and news researchers Linda Niemi and Norma White contributed to this article.

ADRON DORAN 1909-2001

Adron Doran worked to make Morehead State "one of the outstanding regional universities in the nation."

Caption: (Adron Doran)