At the end of World War II, military veterans flooded back to the United States from overseas. They were armed with the GI Bill— their ticket to higher education. But veterans returning to Portland faced a dilemma: there was no four-year public institution of higher education in the city. The solution was Vanport Extension Center.

The creation of Vanport Extension Center can be traced to the decision by the General Extension Division of the Oregon State System of Higher Education to hire a counselor for returning World War II veterans who wished to enroll in college. They hired Stephen Epler, an educator who held a Ph.D. from Columbia University and was himself a Navy veteran. He found that many veterans could not attend school in Eugene or Corvalis and were settling in Vanport, just as he had done. So Epler proposed that the state system site classes there. John Cramer, dean of the General Extension Division, endorsed Epler's proposal, and on March 24, 1946, the State Board of Higher Education granted its approval. Epler had until June 18, fewer than three months, to assemble the facilities, faculty, and staff to open a summer session of the Vanport Extension Center.