PSU founder Stephen E. Epler (left) was one of two candidates for the PSU presidency in 1955. He is pictured in 1996 with Gordon Dodds, author of The College that Would Not Die: The First Fifty Years of Portland State University, 1946-1996, when Epler returned to campus to be honored during the University's 50th anniversary.

Stephen E. Epler (1909-1997), the founder of Portland State University, completed his undergraduate education in 1932 at Nebraska's Costner College, where he formed a strong belief that education can create greater opportunities for all citizens. Pursuing his goal to teach at a teachers college, Epler pursued an M.A. in education at the University of Nebraska, paying his way by taking advantage of his athletic skills to supervise physical education and coach basketball and track at Chester, the university's high school. This first teaching experience enabled Epler to demonstrate innovation, one of his special talents. It was at Chester that he invented six-man football, which quickly caught on in many rural schools across America that were too small to field 11-man teams. After three years of high school teaching, Epler moved to New York in 1936 to study for a Ph.D. at Teachers College of Columbia University.
In 1940 Epler became dean of men at Southern Oregon State College (SOSC), one of the state’s teachers colleges, where he assumed administrative and teaching responsibilities. He joined the Navy in 1943, serving until the end of World War II, when he was discharged with the rank of lieutenant. Instead of returning to SOSC, he accepted a new position in Portland, counseling returning veterans on their educational opportunities. Recruited by John F. Cramer, dean of the General Extension Division of the Oregon State System of Higher Education (OSSHE), Epler realized that returning veterans who wanted to use the GI Bill to finance their college education were hamstrung by the lack of a public college and housing opportunities in Portland. His innovative solution in 1946 was to use Vanport City, which had a ready supply of housing, to establish Vanport Extension Center, a new branch of the General Extension Division of OSSHE and the forerunner of Portland State University.

Epler led the development of Vanport Extension Center at Vanport City (1946-1948) and at the Oregon Ship site (1948-1952) following the 1948 Memorial Day flood. He then spearheaded the Center’s move to the old Lincoln High School in Portland in 1952, and his continued advocacy led to the creation of Portland State College in 1955. Although Epler was not chosen as president of Portland State, his proven leadership enabled him to move on to a stellar career leading other higher education institutions in California. He served as president of Reedley College, went on to become president of College of Marin, and founded Ohlone College in Fremont, where he served as president until he retired in 1975.

Epler’s significant contributions to Portland State have been recognized by the University. In 1996 Epler was invited back to campus during Portland State’s 50th anniversary celebration, where he was honored by being named professor emeritus. That same year the Centennial Society was founded to assist and honor individuals wishing to support PSU through deferred gifts. The society was later named the Stephen E. and Ferne M. Epler Society.
Epler’s numerous achievements are recognized in *The College That Would Not Die: The First Fifty Years of Portland State University, 1946-1996* (Oregon Historical Society Press, 2000), which author and University historian Gordon Dodds dedicated to “the memory of Stephen E. Epler, founder and savior of the University.” *Portland State University: A History in Pictures*, by Richard Sanders and Brent Schauer, (Retirement Association of Portland State University, 2009) is dedicated to Epler, “who led Portland State from its inception as Vanport Extension Center in the spring of 1946 through its efforts to become a four-year college in 1955.” On the PSU campus at Stephen E. Epler Hall, the student housing facility named in his honor, appreciation from past and present students of Portland State is memorialized: “We thank you for founding Portland State University. Through flood waters and challenges to the School’s very existence, you believed in us and our school. You were our inspiration.”