

## David Benson, Track 2

Tape 2, Side A

JB: You were talking about two points.

DB: Right. I think—my view of administration is the view I've picked up from Oviatt, and Cleary, and Prator, and [Earl] Wallis, and Richfield and everyone else. I tried to summarize it many times by saying that we have three huge areas of concern, whether you're a department chairman or a dean or a vice president or a president, and they are the curriculum and they are personnel and they are resources. And in the governance of CSUN, I think there has been a very steady point of view that the curriculum is in the hands of the faculty. We've never had administrators who have taken big charge or a point of view that the curriculum should move in a particular direction. So, the collegiality in the governance of the faculty determined what the curriculum was. Obviously, some administrators tried to lead, and you want some consultation, but the governing philosophy is that's the realm of the faculty. On academic personnel matters on hiring, and promotion, and retention of faculty, I think that's very much of a shared responsibility, with the faculty having predominance, but certainly the administration is more involved in that. And I think that's been true, I think the deans and vice president and president had a little more concern and involvement with hiring, and promotion and personnel than they have with curriculum. And then on the third area, the resources, I think throughout the university's history that's been viewed as the realm of the administration, with faculty having input, faculty having information, but the fundamental decisions are made through the administrative channels and so on. Beyond that I think the campus has always had a philosophy or governing point of view that teaching is very important, and teaching is the preeminent concern of the university. Although, at Northridge, scholarship has always had a place, and it's been a good balance. There's been some excellent scholars at Northridge who are never put down, they are always nurtured. The emphasis is not so much on publish or perish, that everyone has to be really out there in front for scholarship, but, and teaching has been the most important, and I think that's sort of been true as long as I was familiar with Northridge. Teaching was the preeminent activity. In terms of governance I think there's been Prator, Cleary, myself, Paul Walker, Earl Wallis, Jerry Richfield, the people who I knew as deans. I think there's been a general point of view that the purpose of administration is to help the institution, to serve the faculty and that's not always been believed, because the faculty don't always see it that way, but I sense that's always been part of the attitude of the administrators. Most of the administrators on that campus did not see themselves moving onto other jobs. They saw themselves serving that institution, and I think it's remarkable, in a way, that most of these people who served that institution did not seek other jobs or go elsewhere, they stayed there, and they gave of their service and they returned to the faculty. I'll use myself as an example of someone who left. When I left in '84, I determined that it was time for me to get out of the job and I would look for one presidency or two within the system, but I absolutely

convinced that it was not likely that I would get one of those, and I would be back to teaching, and I would be teaching at Northridge. And so, for me, almost every year, I was in administration from '67 to '84. If any year you had said, What are you going to be doing in two or three years, I would've said, Teaching. In other words, I've always looked at administration as sort of a temporary job, and I think that's been true of most of the administrators here. Most of them led longer than they thought they would, but they all felt part of the same institution, part of the same academic enterprise. And as such their job was to help, and as such, they were not eager to say no. That is, if someone came forward with a proposal the first answer we agreed among ourselves, that the first answer to a new proposal is not no, it's let's find out about it, let's see if it can be done, let's see if it has any merit. I remember in the first year I met Del Oviatt, he said, "Dave you have to remember that one thing about higher education is that you cannot tell on the basis of the first glimpse of an idea, you can't tell whether it will grow into a sunflower that will bloom, explode, and die in the same year, or an oak tree that will be here a hundred years from now." He said, "You have to look at every idea as though it might be an oak tree." And I tried to carry that out. Now, obviously, you know, you can't always do that, but there are many ideas in education you cannot tell their quality when they're first broached. So, I think we had a governing philosophy. I think it was pro-teaching, I think it was sharing with faculty at different levels with, depending on the nature of the concern, and it was one of trying to be facilitated to the extent possible.

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JB: Do you think that would serve also, to use another, turn of phrase, as an institutional of philosophy, this was really be the institutional philosophy of the university?

DB: Well, I'd like to believe it was. And yet, you know, with the various conflict that arise, I'm sure that many would say that's either naïve, or it's just an outright lie. But from where I was that's how I saw it, and that's how I felt about it.

JB: In '77 we established a formal long-range academic planning commission, on which you belong, and that process had gone on for seven years by the time you left. What were the results of long-range academic planning, long range institutional planning, over those seven years? Were there discernible results that had come from it? There was certainly a lot of emphasis on it.

DB: I think the results were negligible, and disappointing. I think it's extremely hard to find a process of planning that works in higher education, beyond what we know works in terms of departments, the collegiality and the forward-looking nature. I think you have to try and look ahead, but I think the difficulty with most planning efforts, is that they develop paperwork is such an extraordinary rate.

JB: (Loud ringing noise) Pardon me. I didn't even know this thing was sitting here. For that matter, I don't know how to turn it off. That's the answer.

DB: (laughs) What is that?

JB: I guess it's a- I really don't know. I think it's a calculator.

DB: Ok, has a little timer on it okay.

JB: You try to account for everything, unplug the phone, doesn't matter.

DB: (laughs with John) Well, I don't even know where I was now.

JB: We were talking about academic planning.

[00:09:23]

DB: Yeah. I think it's extremely difficult without—to develop a process that does not produce so much paperwork that it becomes a burden, and people begin to resent the work involved in the paperwork, and the paperwork becomes the process, and everyone is busy filling out their forms, or doing what they're supposed to do, and there's not enough time to think about, once you have the paperwork, what are you going to do with it? What does it mean for the institution? I know, early on, when we sat in those first meetings, with the planning process how we tried to develop a system of having the budgets understood, and how the plan was going to emerge. I think there within the three thousand institutions of higher education, I would guess that less than ten percent of them would have any kind of effective plan. That's not to say you shouldn't keep trying, that's not to say that Northridge's planning process is a bad one, they are simply very difficult to pull off and you cannot try to impose someone else's plan or process, because every institution is so different. This is beside the point now, but one of the things I've tried to do at Sonoma, in the last two years, is create a planning process there. And I'm using a somewhat different approach there than we use at Northridge, partly because I think the Northridge approach did not work very well. But it may be that the one we invent at Sonoma won't work very well either. But I do think it's worth the effort to keep trying. What normally happens is the process develops a large tome and people put it on the shelf and they may get back to some aspects of it, but basically so much of it is you know sort of wasted energy, that you have to believe that the process of planning is more important than the product of planning. If you get people thinking beyond the horizon of the next semester, I think you've probably accomplished your objective. But I don't think Northridge's planning process is in any sense a successful model. That's not to say they shouldn't continue to try to tone it and tune it up and moderate—you have to have a group that's engaged, and try to engage in planning.

JB: If your process works at Sonoma, you'll share it with us, will you?

DB: Well, I think, I think it's a very simple approach, but it's for one that we think we might be able to revise every year, and uh, but we'll have to run it for two or three years before we find out if it's any good at all.

JB: What do you reckon, looking back on your career at Northridge, what do you reckon your most important accomplishments were? I know that's a tough question, but if you were to lay out the most important, the ones you're most proud of, what would they be?

DB: Hmm. I think I'm a process-oriented person, and I believe I was good for the institution during a difficult period in the late sixties and through the seventies. I think I maintained a degree of trust from the faculty that allowed other things to happen, so that not too much time, and too much energy, although there certainly was substantial time and energy spent in disagreement and other things dealing with the problem, but I think I left a legacy of trust, and a continuity in the institution. I think we were blessed with very good administrators. I think my selection of uh, or the university's selection, but my concurrence with Jerry Richfield as the dean in Humanities, or Letters, Arts, and Sciences at the time, was a very good decision, even though I was warned and told that that would be a terrible decision but I think he served the institution very well. I think Earl Wallis served the institution extremely well, I think Don Bianchi has served the institution very well. I think some of my administrative appointments were excellent. And the ability that I had to work with all kinds of administrators, and not try and become too personally involved, but rather try and keep the vision of the institution looking at what is good for this institution, rather than personal careers, and trying to constantly build a team—we had a very good team of the deans. That is, they worked for the institution. They understood, every dean understood that their first responsibility was for the good of the university, their second responsibility was for the good of their school. And whenever we had a dean that went out of that basic philosophy, whenever we hired a dean who demonstrated their first priority was their school and not the university, I would personally try to intercede, and point out to them, You're missing an important concept here. And I think that worked very well during the period I was vice president and even before. There are a lot of little things, I think my work with the Foundation was positive, because I saw we had a very fine foundation, and it began to make money. I wanted to see that that money went back to the university. I pushed really hard for policies that said that excess revenue, from the bookstore, and so on, would go back into the student projects' fund and institutional improvement fund, and so on. So that whole policy which was, you know, worked out by the Foundation board with Don Queen's help, and my help, and so on, I feel a heavy involvement in that policy because I think I was one of the first people to see the full potential of the Foundation being a source of external support for the institution. Beyond that, I think my accomplishments were pretty minimal. I think we had a degree of trust, which allowed people to work, and most of the accomplishments are what people do when they are given the freedom to work.

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JB: So, the process involved liberating them to do their best work.

DB: Right. It's sort of like liberal education, you know, the concept is if you're free to think, and you have the basic background to think, then with the background that you have in liberal education, you're able to move ahead. I think one of the most effective administrators I've ever worked with was Earl Wallis, and Earl would almost never suggest a clear vision as to where we should be going, or where a department should be going, or where an individual faculty member should be going. What Earl used was the Socratic method of asking a question. He'd see a faculty member and he'd say what are you doing in scholarship these days? Well, a faculty member who wasn't doing any scholarship would feel embarrassed by that question. Earl never said, We want you to be involved actively in scholarship. He'd ask, "What are you doing?" because he knows every faculty member knows they should be actively engaged in some form of scholarship. Whether it's reading or whether it's writing or whether it's doing experimental research, but he did that with curriculum, he did that with departments. He tried to get departments to ask, Where are you going? and Why are you going there? Why are you doing those things? Why are your grading policies the way they are? Not criticizing the grading policies, but Tell me as an educator why they are that way. By raising those questions, he became a very effective leader.

JB: Highly respected.

DB: Yes.

JB: Highly respected. I've heard that you have remarked, and this is second hand, so you can confirm or deny, that being provost at Northridge was tougher than being president at Sonoma State is. Is that something like the way you might've said it?

DB: Oh yes, I think it—yes, I think the vice president's job, the acting vice president's job, is one of the toughest jobs on the university campus, simply because the sense of responsibility is very broad, you're involved with, clearly, the most important aspects of the university, but from my standpoint I think the reason it was harder to be provost and executive vice president at Northridge than is to be president has to do with something inside. At Northridge when I made a decision, I had the sense that I had to make a decision that was good for the university, and also did not hurt the presidency, because I have a sense of loyalty to the institution and the presidency, and I never wanted to make a decision that put President Cleary in a bad light. Now, as president, the decisions I make I don't have to worry about putting myself in bad light, in other words if I put myself in a bad light I can—that's my fault, and I have no responsibility other than to myself. But that's as I say, it's an internal sense. I always felt at Northridge I had the, I tried make the best decisions for the university, but at the same time I had to be concerned that I didn't injure the position of the president, because I think the

position of the president symbolically is terribly important. It's less important in a real sense, but it's very important symbolically.

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JB: We have a, a bit of time and I wonder if, in view of that, we might double back, do one last chronological evaluation, talk just a bit in response to Bill Burwell's remarks that we were talking about before we went on tape. You were involved extensively in dealing with student administrators in the late sixties and early seventies.

DB: Mm-hm.

JB: And one upshot of all of this was two new departments—Pan African Studies and Chicano Studies. What led the administration to decide to create those departments?

DB: Well, I don't think, I think it probably wasn't the administration that created them. That is, I think it was the faculty that created them, and the administration given its sense of faculty dominance and curriculum, acceded to their formation. Now why the faculty decided to create them, probably is, stems from a mixture of support for the notion that those areas had a body of knowledge that was not being developed in higher education, and a reluctance of the faculty and the other disciplines to develop those areas in their own field, and in that sense it had a negative point of view. That is, if there's a point of view to be developed—now let's talk about African American points of view or Black points of view. I personally tried to work for curriculum that brought the Black perspective into the existing disciplines, and I wasn't as persuaded that it was wise to form a department, because I felt there was the sentiment, and there was a possibility, that forming those departments was an easy way out for other disciplines. However, the other disciplines and the faculty, you know, they voted on that, and there was an element of fear involved, there was an element of intimidation involved, it was part of the demands presented to Paul Blomgren, and to the university, and through all the years and struggle. I think there were multiple reasons for forming those departments. I think they were formed with the idea that they would go away.

JB: Really? I was going to ask you that question, they aren't temporary departments.

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DB: They were formed as an experimental department. I don't think the administration necessarily felt that way, but I think the faculty who proposed that they be formed felt that way. And the evidence suggests that in American higher education that that did happen on many, many campuses. That they were formed, and they did in fact become melded, and the discipline's information was brought in by the other discipline. So, there were probably more departments of Black Studies or Hispanic Studies or Mexican American Studies in 1974 than there are today. But I think it was interesting because at

the time the takeover of the administration building occurred, the campus had been working that entire previous year through the Educational Policies Committee to try and respond to some of the student demands of bringing more content of the Black experience, or the Mexican American experience, or the American Indian experience but primarily the Black experience, which was the most vocal group. The EPC [Educational Policies Committee], and I was serving on the EPC at that time, the EPC was, I was executive secretary at that time, the EPC was trying to respond, and I think they were trying to respond as quickly as an academic community can respond, but it wasn't as fast as some of the Black students wanted it to respond, and had they been able to continue that path of responding with Black history being in the History Department and Black sociological thought being in the Sociology Department, the institution may have developed without a Pan African Studies Department, or without a Mexican American Studies Department, but the incidents of, you know, the tide of history went too fast, in '69 and '70 and '71, and the students' demand for the separate department and all of that, was too strong, and the faculty finally decided to recommend that they be formed. And I'm not sure how many believed that they were long standing, or that they were right, but they felt that somehow that was the political decision to make at the time. I remember going out and speaking to groups of people in the community, I spoke with a number of community groups and ethnics(??) over that period of time, and, you know, I was representing, or trying to represent, the university's point of view, that this experiment, this thing that we're doing, this thing we're trying to bring in more Hispanics, more Blacks, more minorities, giving them a sense of the curriculum, was a very important thing for the university to do. And I believe it was an important thing to do, and I think the forms that it takes at the various institutions are very different, but it's certainly a very positive thing.

JB: Bill feels that, has said that he feels that without the violence, um, the results that ensued in those departments being established could not have occurred. He's very, you know —I think it's fair to summarize his position as being very ambivalent toward that day because he see things differently today than he did then. And one thing that I think this book is going to bring out is his own journey on these issues, but I think I'm—I'm fairly summarizing his view, both toward the violence on November 4<sup>th</sup>, and the other surrounding violence, intimidation.

DB: Yeah.

JB: And the results which he sees as positive. Is that a fair or an accurate summary, in your view, that that may have tipped the scales? That November 4<sup>th</sup> or that intimidation or that threat of what might happen, made the difference in creating those departments?

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DB: Yeah, I think that—I think that certainly I believe the intimidation and the threat of violence and the actual violence and the events that were occurring all over the nation, took the

academic community all over the nation, you know, in an unprepared state. There were very few academics, who had ever dealt with true, physical or psychological intimidation. They didn't know how to deal with it, and they dealt with us rather poorly. They responded in ways that may not have been the best, you know, possible environment. Now, was the net result positive? In some cases I think it was, in some cases it was not. In my own view is, that if Northridge—the departments did not get off on a good standing, they—had they developed somewhat more slowly—and I think they would have developed, possibly not exactly like, but something like our Religious Studies. When Religious Studies was conceived as a program at Northridge, it was conceived as an interdisciplinary program. And it was put together with a few courses that the faculty agreed had legitimate content, and should be taught, and there was a group of people who were prepared to teach those courses in religious studies, and we formed a program in religious studies. And then, within a very short period of time, they said, "We really should hire someone who really knows something about religious studies," and we hired Tom Love. And Tom Love brought to Religious Studies a whole professional perspective of what was possible with a Religious Studies program and obviously converted it from an interdisciplinary program with a lot of different disciplines participating, into a field of study and eventually a department which hires religious studies professors. That's probably—that would have been a more normal and a more positive development than we have at Northridge with the—with the Pan African Studies Department and the Mexican-American Studies Department. Because we hired people who did not always have a full understanding of the academic community, of the expectations of the academic community, the traditions of the academic community. They came in as somewhat as revolutionaries and we didn't have the time to go out and find the best people, who could in fact build an academic program, and a program to influence young Blacks or young Hispanics. So, we ended up—

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