David Brooks: All right it’s June 29, 2006, and I’m David Brooks, the interviewer for the University of Montana’s Oral History Project. Today I’m talking with Donald Habbe. I was wondering if you could start out by telling us a little bit about your personal background, your educational background, and what led you to Missoula and the University of Montana.

Donald Habbe: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I grew up in Wisconsin. I did my undergraduate work at Dennison University in Granville, Ohio, in political science. Then I went on to graduate work in political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a Ph.D. in 1957. I then went in the State Department in the Foreign Service for about three years. Then I began a teaching career. I taught at the University of South Dakota, the University of Denver. I got into academic administration as an associate dean of South Dakota, then became dean of arts and sciences. I came to Missoula as academic vice president in 1977 at U of M. I served in that position until 1992 when I retired from full-time work. I took a few more years on a post-retirement contract. Then I fully retired in the mid-1990s.

DB: What made you change from a teaching career to administration?

DH: That’s an interesting question because I’ve had several opportunities to get into administration and thought that I didn’t particularly want to do it because I was enjoying teaching and the life of a professor. But I was recruited by a friend, who was the dean of the college of South Dakota, to become an associate dean. I discovered that although administration is not necessarily held in high regard on university campuses, that it was a good way to learn things. I was forced to deal with a lot of things I didn’t know anything about. It really became an educational process for me.

It’s also a way to have an influence on things. If you get personal rewards by helping other people to accomplish their objectives, then administration can be very satisfying even though there are a lot of frustrations in it. So I kind of stumbled into it and found that I enjoyed it. Administration isn’t always easy. Most people who go into teaching in higher education, I think, prefer the individual autonomy that a faculty member has rather than being so tightly linked to an organization. That was kind of how I developed.

DB: So when you came to the University of Montana, you came in as the academic vice president, so you were well into administration by then?

DH: Yes.
DB: Having had administrative experiences, and I guess as well as teaching experiences at other universities or institutions, can you describe what it was like at UM when you came in respect to those?

DH: Well I think a lot of things are similar to the experiences I had before. In other words, the organization of the university, the issues in higher education tend to be the same at a lot of campuses. Each campus, on the other hand, has its own individual situation and unique circumstance. I had come from a background in arts and sciences. I had been an arts and science dean in South Dakota.

At Montana, the arts and sciences occupy a central place at the university, but at the same time, there are professional schools that have grown up around it. That’s what makes sort of the contemporary liberal arts public university. So in that sense, it really wasn’t very different. There were certainly some unique aspects and problems in Montana. I think it’s all pretty cut from the same cloth.

DB: So you mentioned that there are issues in higher education that are pretty common and then you ended saying that there were some unique aspects at the UM. Can you sort of review what some of those across the board issues are in higher ed from your viewpoint and also what was unique about the university?

DH: Okay; well the things that I think are typical, or almost perpetual for public universities, particularly universities that had developed from the arts and science, or the liberal arts core, they rely essentially on public funds to function. Traditionally tuition was not as high as it is now. The whole balance has now changed. They’re public institutions, but yet they have, particularly in their liberal arts aspects, have some of the characteristics of a private liberal arts college. It’s always an interesting balance to try and recognize that you’re a public institution working for the public and having to deal in public ways.

At the same time, an academic institution hates to keep a certain distance from the public in terms of what sentiments are on political issues or economic issues or what have you. The concept of academic freedom and of diversity and a number of those other things sometimes create a tension between a university and the public. Within the public sector, you’re trying to make sure that you respond to your mission to the public and the legislature and the political structure. At the same time, you need to maintain your autonomy and your educational integrity. It’s a little bit different from the role of the private college.

DB: Okay, so we were talking about just the commonalities and issues in higher education. How about some of the unique aspects about the University of Montana?

DH: Okay. Well when I came in 1977, the University was really going through a difficult period. Although it was a time of growth in higher education generally and nationally, U of M’s enrollment had actually been falling. That was probably due to a number of things. This finally
gained the attention of the legislature and the Board of Regents. Just about the time I arrived as a result of legislative funding decisions, the university was forced to eliminate—well there were various numbers used—but the equivalent of about 40 or 50, or maybe even 60 faculty positions and an equivalent number of staff positions.

DB: Sorry, that’s in the entire university system?

DH: No that was at U of M Missoula. That was about a 12- or 13 percent cut in the personnel area. It was something that developed over a number of years. Looking at it from hindsight, the university probably didn’t take action on as soon enough. It may have lost touch with the political constituencies in the state. Other institutions were growing. The university was not doing as well as it should have in terms of recruiting students, retaining them, taking good care of them when they were here.

So we were losing out. Ultimately, of course, that meant that as other institutions grew, and U of M declined, the legislature inevitably said, “Hey, we’re not going to fund you at the levels you used to be funded when you don’t have the students.” So those decisions were basically made before I got here. One of the things we all got involved in was to then implement those decisions, trying to make those cuts and get things back on an even keel so we could get on about our business. That was a fairly unique situation. It’s not the first time it’s happened in Montana. It’s not the first time it’s happened at Missoula. It was a particularly difficult one because the cuts were so severe.

DB: How was the university failing its students? Why was it that enrollment was dropping here against the national trend?

DH: My perception and I think you can get different views from different people, well there were a number of things. One, that was a time in which, after a kind of strong growth in liberal arts and sort of historic majors, a lot of students migrated to applied fields, business, engineering, what have you. There was the perception that U of M was just a liberal arts school and didn’t have programs that you could make a living with after you had a degree, which was an inaccurate perception.

DB: Inaccurate in that you could make a living with those liberal arts degrees or there were applied fields?

DH: Both. Another problem was that what would be called New Student Services recruiting, getting out and telling the story of the University and what a good place it was academically and otherwise was simply not being done. Our student record system was not adequate. There was not good management of the class schedule. If a faculty member didn’t want to teach at 8 o’clock, they didn’t have to teach at 8 o’clock. So the decisions about when classes were taught and how many students would be allowed in classes were basically left up to individual faculty members.
To a certain extent, that’s what you normally had, but finally someone has to say, “We can’t deliver our curriculum unless the students can access it.” So there has to be something more than just the whim of the professor who will say, “I’m only going to teach on Tuesday and Thursday and want to do research on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.” What about the students who need classes Monday, Wednesday, and Friday? A whole series of probably small decisions was leading students not to come here, or if they came, they couldn’t get into classes.

They couldn’t complete their degrees in the time available. So the attraction to new students was not as strong as it should have been, given the basic quality of the university. The ability of the university to hold on to students and to really serve them was not up to where it should have been. Institutions from time to time go through this kind of thing where, not by design, but probably because they drift and don’t pay attention.

Another thing I was going to mention—something that happened at many institutions and certainly happened at U of M—in the period when institutions moved away from in loco parentis to treating students as adults. What had formally been the dean of men and the dean of women and student affairs functions, and that kind of thing, disappeared. That happened at a lot of schools. In the attempt to liberate students and to treat them as adults, a lot of the student functions, student support services were also—they just disappeared.

Students were really thrown on their own. So the advising system tended to break down. It was weakened. There wasn’t much done for students in terms of personal counseling. For students who came inadequately prepared, there wasn’t much remedial service. So one of the things that became necessary without going back to the old days of dean of men and dean of women, was to build back student services in a way that could really help students succeed.

I think most institutions learned that lesson that you can’t just walk away and say, “Well that’s your problem. Figure it out.” There were a whole series of things that needed to be done and they couldn’t be done overnight because one of the dilemmas when you’re in a posture of cutting back, as we were in 1977 and ’78, was that you end up probably cutting things that you shouldn’t cut just because of the budget realities of the situation. So that was a difficult period. It took a number of years to turn that around. I think little by little the institution, through the work of a lot of people, was able to right itself and serve students better and start to build enrollment back up. It got out of what was clearly a difficult time, but it was—

DB: So I’m going to go back to something that you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation. You said that one of the things about being in administration that was new to you, but common in administration is that you’re not always well received on campus. So I suspect coming to UM at a difficult time like that, that could well be the case or could be exaggerated even, tensions perhaps high on campus [when positions were] being cut. Describe a little bit about the relationship between administration and the rest of campus at the time:

Donald Habbe Interview, OH 408-010, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
administration and students, administration and faculty, the president’s role, the perception of the president.

DH: Well it was very hard. Inevitably in a period like that where some difficult decisions have to be made, decisions really that nobody wants to make, there is a temptation to say, “Well, we really don’t need to make those decisions.” Or, “Let’s just see if we can get more money from the legislature,” that kind of thing. There had been a faculty or a group representing some of the faculty for years that wanted to go for collective bargaining. There had been various attempts to do that.

Finally, during this period, I think it was 1977, late ’77 or early ’78, enough faculty members voted for collective bargaining. It was then the University Teachers Union became the bargaining agent for the faculty. So that was one of the consequences, was the faculty voted for collective bargaining. Believing, I think, that they couldn’t trust the traditional mechanisms and that they needed to take care of their own interests through some group that represented themselves, which I think, looking back on it, was probably understandable. More directly to your question about relationships, they were difficult because given the funding and the decisions that the Board of Regents and the way the funding system worked, you basically couldn’t just say, “Well we’re not going to make any cuts.”

We didn’t have the budget. The budget decisions had already been made. In those circumstances, the administration is forced into making tough and often unpopular decisions. You can explain. You can communicate. You can try and make people understand, but often times there’s a tendency to believe, that well, if you could just do this or do that, maybe we wouldn’t have to do this. There’s this kind of denial that—I think that was stronger among the faculty probably more than the students.

Students don’t like to see people lose their jobs. So you tend to create a situation—if you get into that situation—you tend to create a situation where people get pitted against each other. That’s one of the reasons why you try and avoid getting into it at all costs and try and prevent it from ever happening. If it ever happens, then you have to take fairly severe actions to deal with the situation.

So we faced that for a number of years, but were able to, after about a year and a half of negotiations, include a collective bargaining agreement with the faculty that dealt with issues of salary and working conditions and that kind of thing. Little by little, we were able to build back the resources where we needed them. A problem that really exacerbated things was that a number of the areas of the university were growing. Other areas were in a state of decline, in terms of student interest. Because of this really inattention to this problem over a number of years, you could end up with a department or a school or program that was totally tenured faculty.

Donald Habbe Interview, OH 408-010, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Lots of faculty, not many students. Over in business or pharmacy or someplace else, lots of students, but not enough faculty. If you could simply convert the philosopher faculty into a pharmacist, that would be wonderful, but it doesn’t work that way. So making changes to adapt the organization or the university to enrollment trends and that kind of thing has to come fairly slowly and incrementally. Over the years, it did finally happen.

DB: I’ve heard the university at times be referred to as a graveyard for presidents. You certainly outlasted quite a few of them, or a number of them. How did the president’s role fit in this? How did it affect the president at the time?

DH: I worked for four different presidents, Richard Bowers, Neil Bucklew, Jim Koch, and George Dennison. It is true until President Dennison’s tenure that the typical life of a president at the University of Montana was not very long. Although, again, that’s not particularly unique to U of M. In the case of President Bowers, who was president when I was hired, he went through I think the most difficult period. Finally, he basically resigned. He was really strongly encouraged and forced to resign by the Board of Regents as probably an outcome from all of this, turmoil in the late ’70s.

President Bucklew was here for four or five years. He was certainly not under pressure to resign, but when an opportunity to go to a larger, more prestigious university, University of West Virginia, [West Virginia University] which was his home, he was happy to take it. There is, for most presidents, I think there’s a period when they could be effective and initiate new measures and develop support. If the environment is adverse or a number of difficult decisions are made, there’s a tendency to focus the blame or responsibility on the person at the head of the organization, which is inevitable. It’s certainly the same thing in the corporate world or the military world or what have you. It’s probably not unusual that there’s a turnover in presidencies typically.

DB: By the same token, when we blame or place the blame on the head of an organization, we also often characterize an organization by its head. You have the Bowers years, the Bucklew years. How were those characteristically different?

DH: Well different personalities, different individuals. I would almost say that although there were differences, and I think different levels of success, the issues in many respects were about the same. Let’s take one for an example, how do you create a better sense of constituency among the public of Montana for a university like this? It’s more difficult for the liberal arts university than land grant institution, particular in an agricultural state like Montana. The advantage I’m talking about is Montana State.

The advantage of the land grant institution with co-op extensions, with experiment stations and all of the other things, there’s a kind of built-in constituency for the university. Land grant institutions have gone way beyond serving farmers and offering them home economics and doing experiments for agriculture. They’ve become far more complex institutions. They have
natural constituencies. The liberal arts universities are the ones that have the law school or fine arts, arts and sciences, journalism, what have you. It’s a more difficult task.

One of the things I learned when I first came here was the efforts being made trying, weld a better tie, a better understanding between the public and the university. That was something that Richard Bowers really began with the Excellence Fund through the U of M Foundation to raise private money to provide a margin of excellence for things that probably weren’t really supported by the state.

But every president since then, President Bucklew, President Koch, President Dennison, have built on that. It’s not the same thing. Many of those ventures and efforts were really not started yesterday, but have been developed and have been made more successful and have come to fruition. The issue of making sure that you’re a statewide institution—there is a lot of regionalism in Montana. There’s a lot of geography to be covered. You can’t be just the University of Western Montana, you’ve got to be the university for the entire state. In fact, even hopefully, have some sort of profile regionally and nationally. So you’ve got to be out in the state convincing people of the state, and the elites of the state, that you really are their state university. If they’re more comfortable with the other university, if that seems more down home to them, if that seems more authentically Montana, then you have to work doubly hard to convince them that it’s important that your university is really part of their responsibility too, not just in terms of student recruitment, but what you’re going to do, and public service, and research efforts, all of the rest of it.

That inevitably becomes the agenda of any president—part of the agenda—just to get out among the public, among the political elites and to convince these people that this is their university and it’s something very important and they need to treasure it and to enhance it. I think different presidents were successful at different levels on this, but the issues and the efforts have been pretty much along the same lines.

DB: So I’m going to switch gears a little bit; we’ve been talking about a sort of large concept of the university as a whole. I’d like for you to talk a little bit about the very specific nature of your job as academic vice president and especially, you mentioned that one thing you liked about administration is being able to have a very direct influence on people and on their jobs, [the] ability to do their job. So in the context of talking about your specific job, talk about how you influence people at the university, how you try to guide things through your decisions and your work.

DH: Well as academic vice president, later provost, you’re probably responsible for more than two thirds of the personnel in the university and close to two thirds of the budget. So in a sense, you’re the vice president that’s basically, supposedly, responsible for delivering the most fundamental function of the institution. That’s not to demean the other areas, but they’re really support areas—business and finance, student services, all the other things that come

Donald Habbe Interview, OH 408-010, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
along. In an academic organization the basic academic work of the institution is done by faculty members and departments and schools.

It is not like a corporate organization in which the decisions are made in Main Hall centrally and then handed down to faculty members. Teaching at the higher education level is a profession. So you’re dealing with people who are professionals. To an extraordinary extent, [they] have an opportunity to kind of define their careers and what they want to emphasize and what they want to do and how they want to teach. That’s really left up to them. They have a great deal of autonomy.

I think that’s one of the great strengths of American higher education, is it’s built on that principle. So it’s very important to recruit and retain and promote and reward people who are of high quality and who will use that professional opportunity and autonomy to the best. I think that the vast majority of faculty members do that. They don’t need to be told what to do. They don’t have to go in to their supervisor, who will sit down and give them the week’s schedule. They should know what to do and they should want to do [it].

Sometimes there’ll be a difference of opinion about whether what function is more important than others or whether your class load should be 12 hours or 14 and how much time you should be getting off for research or something like that. The basic obligations and the understanding of the role has to well up from the bottom, from the faculty. That’s where the work from the institution was done. Whether a unit is organized as a separate school or a department, such as history, or in the library, a great deal of respect and difference has to be extended to the professional autonomy of the people who are doing the work.

At the same time, that doesn’t mean that you just tell everybody, “Well you just do whatever you want to and we think this will work out pretty well.” That probably is what happened at the university during the early ’70s. It does make a difference if students can’t get into classes. A department chair or a dean or somebody will finally have to sit down and say, “If everybody says ‘I only want to teach two classes’ and ‘I only want to teach on Thursday’ and ‘I like small classes so I’m not going to allow more than 10 students in my class,’ we’re not going to get the job at the history department done.” We’re probably not going to get much research done.

We’re probably not going to serve our students. So somebody has to say, “Look, there are limits here and we’ve got to work this out collegially and collectively.” My approach, as much as possible, is to work off the understanding that the basic work is done at the unit levels, but that you had a decentralized organization [and] you needed to set some general guidelines and parameters centrally and then to develop deans and department chairs, faculty members who could operate within this environment with some generally understood guidelines and rules, but with some belief that they had their responsibility and autonomy to be used in a professional level.
They could be rewarded within that structure. It’s not an easy act. It means from time to time, you’ll have to lay down the law at the central level. If for no other reason, and maybe somebody hired you, lay it down. Like the Board of Regents, which really has the ultimate power. There’s a real paradox. On the one hand, a great deal of the authority and power of the university, most of it, is really focused at the faculty level. The faculty assumes that it is the most important group in the university and sometimes the faculty will say, “We are the university.” In a sense, that’s true.

On the other hand, if you look at the formal authority in the public university, it’s really focused in the Board of Regents, which is the governing body, which has the full power, autonomy, control. So you have a formal system that says, “Here’s this managing board—it’s a constitutional board and therefore has powers beyond the legislature to govern higher education.” So it’s responsible for everything. But that’s a public lay board. Then the real authority and work at the university is done in a very decentralized fashion.

So the distance from the Board of Regents, which meets 10-to-12 times a year—operating in that environment where there’s quite a distance between the formal authority position and the realistic way in which things get done, administrators—I think particularly central administrators—have to develop or decide which are the important questions and try to focus on those. Then they create systems of incentives and maybe penalties, but mostly incentives, to develop positions within the organization are what you would normally think of as a subordinate level—deans, department chairs, directors, etcetera, where people exercise a lot of authority and responsibility.

It’s fascinating. A lot of this has to be done through persuasion and consultation and consensus. You could sit at the center and write a memo and say, “This is what we’re going to do,” but if the faculty really doesn’t want to do it, or they don’t believe it’s a good idea, they have tremendous power to see that it won’t happen. That’s true in any organization. But it’s certainly true in higher education. It’s a very interesting, challenging organizational environment.

DB: So we’ve been focusing on this really transitionary time at the university. One of the elements of that transition, as you just mentioned, is going from faculty having a little too much autonomy, to the detriment of the students—

DH: I wouldn’t characterize it as faculty having too much autonomy, it was that the institution was not paying attention to what its responsibilities were. So too much was being lost.

DB: So you have that transition at the university, trying to pay more attention, trying to do better by the students, at the same time you have the collective bargaining of the faculty taking place. Who were some of the key players for both faculty and administration during that time, names that stand out to you, either promoting those changes at the head of them, or opponents to you?
DH: I think the negotiations, the first collective bargaining contract with the faculty, was a key
development because that contract covered a whole series of things. It wasn’t just salaries and
wages. It was academic freedom. It was academic responsibility. It dealt with the faculty
evaluation system, the authority of department chairs. So it was a comprehensive contract. It
was a beneficial contract in the sense that a lot of things that were either just sort of
understood or maybe not understood, but had been done differently by different sections of
the university, were pulled together and were finally cleared up.

There was this contract that bound both the faculty and the regents and the administration
that said, “This is the way we’re going to do this.” That was very helpful. I think the faculty put
together a good bargaining team. They were headed by Ron Perrin, who was a professor in
philosophy and later made the transition to political science. On the one hand, he was a very
effective spokesman for the faculty. On the other hand, he was able to see larger issues.

One of the key aspects of bargaining, when collective bargaining came, given the law of
collective bargaining in Montana for public employees, the faculty discovered that it was really
bargaining with the Board of Regents, not with the campus administration. If you look at the
contract, it’s between them. That had some potential, but it also had some perils in it because
the regents took the view that since they were bargaining on different campuses, that they
wanted the collective bargaining coordinated out of the commissioner’s office, understandably.

They were attempting to achieve approximately the same kinds of goals through their various
collective bargaining contracts on campuses. Not all of the institutions are the same in the
Montana university system. What might go down well at Western or Northern was not
necessarily what the University of Montana wanted, either faculty or administration. So one of
the dilemmas that we had— I was a member of the administration team but was not the
spokesman. The spokesman came from the commissioner’s office. There were really two levels
of negotiation.

One was the campus people negotiating with the commissioner’s staff and the Board in terms
of what the regents’ positions would be on some of these issues. Then there was, of course, the
bargaining with the two sides. So it wasn’t really two sides. It was much more complex than
that. I think that you could probably talk to Ron Perrin, he would tell you the same thing from
the faculty point of view. There were lots of different constituencies within the faculty. Some
faculty I know, to give you an example of an issue close to home for you, did the librarians really
belong within the bargaining unit as a member of the faculty?

Library faculty felt very strongly that they were part of the faculty. There’s no doubt in their
mind. In fact that’s the way they were placed in the bargaining unit. There were a number of
faculty, I shouldn’t say many, but there were a number of faculty, that felt that librarians really
weren’t faculty. They did such different things and they couldn’t be treated and measured in
the same way. They didn’t care much about library faculties. Library faculty, as they would
articulate their issues through their bargaining council through the UTU.

Donald Habbe Interview, OH 408-010, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University
of Montana-Missoula.
I find that they had a whole set of issues with regular teaching faculty. So those would be the kind of internal things that would go on. After about, I think a year, with some difficult moments really on both sides, the potential for a strike and a lot of other things, there was an agreement that was negotiated. It wasn’t perfect, but it resolved enough of these issues that sort of moved on. Let me give you one example. You said we’d gone too far towards faculty autonomy. I don’t think it was faculty autonomy. It was just a chaotic approach to decision making.

For example, one of the issues, when a faculty member would come from another school to the U of M, you’d say, “Well how much prior service credit are you going to be given toward tenure?” The regents had a policy. They thought they had a policy. You would give them a maximum of three years prior credit, or four, whatever it was. We had deans. This is prior to collective bargaining, who would give more than that. They would write them a letter. The letter would say, “I hereby give you five years of prior service credit.”

Well, they had clearly gone beyond their authority. If you’re a faculty member coming here and you rely on a representation like that, you’ve probably got a contract. It was reasonable for you to believe that the dean had the authority to do what he offered you. So it wasn’t just an issue of faculty autonomy. It was sort of cleaning up the administration and getting everybody on the same page and saying, “Look here are the things—this is the way we do these things. You can’t just run off and do them. It isn’t every man for himself here.” That’s kind of a minor detail. The collective bargaining contract, although it tended to address a lot of issues, I think there was a feeling on both sides that a lot of those things needed to be addressed.

DB: So we’ve talked a lot about this period at the university. Was it smooth sailing after that? This was a big upheaval and then you rode on out the next 15 years? How about some events from the later ’80s and into the ’90s? That’s the early years of George Dennison, who has remained at the helm for nearly as long as any other president.

DH: Right. Let me touch on one thing. One of the things that was put into the collective bargaining contract was a clause on retrenchment. When the cuts were made in 1977 and ’78, as I indicated to you, it was an accumulation of a problem that had gone on for long enough so you were going to end up doing stuff that you didn’t want to do, but you just had to because you didn’t have enough money to keep paying all the people that were around. So some people who were worthy, doing good jobs, were needed, were going to lose their jobs because they weren’t tenured or didn’t have job protection and the institution had to cut back.

One of the most difficult clauses that was negotiated in that first collective bargaining contract was retrenchment and trying to define the circumstances under which, if an institution faced a fiscal exigency or emergency, how would you make cuts and what would the system be to do that? Recognizing that if you used the normal routine, which is just to take those people who are vulnerable that you may well cut in exactly the wrong areas. Hypothetically, if business is
growing and music is declining, your entire music faculty is tenured so they have a right to serve until whenever. You need more faculty in the business area and you have to cut back. Most of the business faculty that you have are probably non-tenured because they were hired recently. What are you going to do? That was one of the main things, retrenchment would allow you then to say, well in a hypothetical sense, we have this program in XYZ. We have 15 tenured faculty members there. We have no students.

So we want to take those resources and move them from there to over where they’re really needed. How do you do that? So it’s kind of a worse-case scenario. The best advice is to not get in that position in the first place. Retrenchment was an attempt to sort of address that issue. As President Bucklew left, [and] the university was beginning to find itself, we started to make recoveries. We still had these situations where we were overstaffed in certain areas. We couldn’t reposition the resources.

We were just sort of being strangled. When President Bucklew left, he did not invoke retrenchment, but he left a plan, sort of, on the way out the door that suggested the university might well have to drop some academic programs, including communication sciences and disorders and religious studies, several others. That report was extremely controversial. It was not implemented. It was kind of a harbinger of things to come because later on toward the end of the President Koch administration, this problem of an inability to respond to needs and an inability—other than people waiting to die—of getting out.

It’s sort of, do you bleed the organization to death by 1,000 cuts or do you make some specific cuts in some certain areas and try to come out of it better? Either process is very traumatic. That led to the retrenchment process that was actually invoked and was finally accomplished with the loss of, finally, home economics as a program, and business education, and religious studies was recast, and communication sciences and disorders [was eliminated]. The decisions that finally came out were not the ones that were originally proposed, but that was the first time it was actually—it was an implementation of retrenchment. Very difficult, very controversial.

I served for four different presidents. I was acting president three times, once between the departure of Dick Bowers and the arrival of Neil Bucklew. That was three or four months. Between President Bucklew and President Koch, that was another four or five months. That was longer. That was about six or seven months, I guess. Then from president to President Koch to President Dennison. About the time President Dennison came, we had just finally gone through that other cutback. In fact, I had been working over in the commissioner’s office for a year when that finally was implemented. I was not on campus when it was implemented.

President Dennison’s view was that he would not have made those cuts, which is—that certainly can be argued. You could say, well, if you wouldn’t make those cuts, then you’d have to say, assuming he had the same budget situation, “Where would you rather have those cuts? Where would you do them?” I think in President Koch’s defense, or view, the university had

Donald Habbe Interview, OH 408-010, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
made cuts in the traditional way to the point where you just couldn’t do that anymore. You had to take a different approach.

That’s what finally, I think, stimulated him to invoke retrenchment, not that he wanted to. He felt that for the overall good of the entire university, it was debilitating to do it the other way. So it was better to do targeted, focused cuts. President Dennison’s attitude, I think, has been, “We shouldn’t do those things at all. What we should do is have a growing, flourishing university that doesn’t cut programs, but basically adds them and becomes a more complete institution.” He’s been fairly successful in that effort. It has helped that this has been a period of enrollment growth.

I think part of that is due to paying attention to things like student services and getting students into class. Giving them attention when they’re here and trying to do good retention work and get the public sector to understand what the university is all about. Bring in more federal money. This has been a period of enrollment growth. My guess is that we’re probably looking at now, a period of enrollment stability or decline.

If you look at the high school demographics, one of the antidotes to that has been the notion that, well you’ll recruit more out of state students because they pay full fare, maybe more than full fare. The competition for non-resident students among institutions, both public and private, is just phenomenal now. It’s almost like going out and buying football players. You end up discounting your tuition or giving them scholarships to come here. So you don’t get the revenue that you might.

The solution to avoiding retrenchment or avoiding cutbacks is to, of course, to have a growing enrollment base and a funding base. Certainly that has gone on since 1991 when President Dennison has come. In the long run, it probably doesn’t totally avoid the problem. If you can grow the university and then stabilize the enrollment, and if you’re not subject to these demographic trends and that kind of thing, you probably don’t have to deal with those kinds of issues. If the demography of the state is such that the high school population declines, it’s pretty hard to avoid demography.

DB: So you sort of pre-empted my last question there, which is, you’re still a Missoula resident and keep up on the university. I was going to ask your view of the current situation, perhaps the future of the university, which you’ve done. So I guess I’ll just have you offer any other words you have on your time at the university.

DH: I feel very fortunate to have worked at the university. It was challenging. It was a good institution. Later on, in my career, I did a lot of accrediting work for the Northwest Association. I did a lot of accrediting visits, chaired a lot of teams, etcetera. So I got to know a lot about what other schools were doing. I became more and more convinced that the University of Montana is an institution that really out-performs its resource base.
If you look at this in terms of how much was being put into the institution in terms of salary dollars and supplies and scholarship support and that kind of thing, it’s sort of inputs-outputs. If you look at how much you’re putting in and how much you’re getting out, U of M is an incredible institution. If you look at the input indicators, and that’s what people in higher education tend to look at, how well is the faculty paid, how large or small are the classes, how well is the library supported? These are all sort of input indicators.

Then the question becomes, what comes out of this in terms of the students? And what comes out in terms of the graduates? That is what is truly remarkable and amazing about the University of Montana. If you look at the input levels, they’re not the worst in the United States, but they’re typically nowhere close to the middle, Montana’s rankings. It’s not just higher education, it’s teacher’s salaries in the public schools—

DB: Montana tends to claim those lower ranks amongst the states doesn’t it?

DH: Right. So then you’d say, “Well how can they do what they do?” This has been a characteristic of U of M for many, many years. I don’t know if you’ve read H. G. Merriam’s history of the university?

DB: I have.

DH: It’s an interesting book because he sort of breaks it up into the years. Each chapter is a presidency. He was a faculty member who strongly believed that the president’s chief responsibility was really to do what the faculty wanted him to do. Harold Merriam was a tremendous faculty member here, but was a leader of the faculty in urging the Board of Regents and presidents to basically respect and honor the faculty and run the institution the way they wanted it run. Some presidents did that and some others didn’t. There were quite a few in Merriam’s book that didn’t really measure up to his view.

DB: He was not shy about saying so.

DH: No. Many times, the faculty view was absolutely sound and right. Sometimes faculty members, as intelligent and as sophisticated as they are, they tend to know really very little about the larger university. They are so immersed in their own area. To try and educate them about the larger picture or what the context in the state is or anything like that is often a challenging task. These issues of the tension between an intellectually stimulating and free university and the political environment around it, you get that every time in the Merriam book.

The issues of adequate resources or political intervention or that kind of thing recur frequently, not frequently, but regularly. About the time things are stabilized and everything seems to be on a strong course, then something happens. There’s another controversy or another; there’s almost a rhythm to this. I’ve had a number of interesting discussions with President Dennison.
about this. To his credit, I think he is—he’s insisted that the university can be better and bigger and larger and more of a national university than we are. We certainly are now compared to 10 years ago.

That kind of vision and that kind of impetus for a larger, stronger vision is a very healthy kind of force within the institution to move it forward. On the other hand, you always need to be aware of these forces that you can’t control. One would be demography right now. If you look at the high school graduating classes and some of these other things. Or the need to grapple with simply raising tuition and excluding more and more students from education because of a financial hazard—the cost of attending and that kind of thing.

There are always these sort of mitigating factors that any president or anybody would have to pay attention to. I think right now, if you look at the future of higher education right now, both nationally and even in Montana, there’s a lot of reason for optimism in terms of what has been accomplished and I think the University of Montana and Montana State University both are just institutions that are remarkably stronger than you would expect to find given the resources in this state.

There’s always a level of peril in that. The financial tendencies of higher education now to cost more, and more, and more, to place more and more students in a position of extraordinary debt and state legislatures being less and less willing to appropriate at the levels that they used to. I don’t think it’s distrust or hatred of higher education. It’s because other priorities like corrections and social services, and those other things have just become huge responsibilities of state government. So higher education isn’t being picked on, but it can’t get the resources it once did. Then the federal government is sort of looming on the outside.

There are more and more pieces of evidence that there’s a kind of disquiet about whether higher education is really doing what it says it’s doing. It almost reminds me of the concern that has developed appropriately about our public school systems. Are the graduates of schools really being educated? What about the students who are dropping out? What about the students who get degrees and supposedly are qualified, but can’t write and can’t read and can’t do even simple math and are not qualified to do anything? Yet they have a baccalaureate degree from not just a trade school some place, but supposedly accredited, reputable public institutions.

So there’s an increasing level of disquiet about the cost of higher education, about whether institutions are spending too much money on things that maybe are nice, but are not necessarily essential to higher education. The easy targets would be football or those kinds of things. Even how much the state should support research or graduate education. How many graduate Ph.D.s in history do we need in the United States, given the market for historians and that kind of thing?
The fact that maybe, in the case of the public schools, although they're one of our most treasured assets, they're really not performing up to the level we need as a nation to be competitive. I think that there's a growing concern that maybe higher education is in the same boat. It makes a lot of claims. It makes a lot of statements about what it is doing. In some cases it does those things. In some cases, it really doesn't.

What are we going to do about it? Higher education, unlike the public school system, has always operated on a system of self-governance autonomy. If there's a quality control mechanism there, it's probably the accrediting system in the United States, which is not really a system. It's a kind of crazy float pad. (?) It's worked pretty well. The essence of that system is self-regulation. What's happening now, I think, is—and I saw this in the accreditation business—a lot of stuff that used to be taken on faith, that we're doing a good job and you can trust us to do a good job and we don't want federal intervention or state intervention or outside intervention [is being challenged]. We know what we're doing. Trust us. Incidentally we need more money. That attitude, I think, is less and less effective now.

Business leaders, there's President Bush—or I guess it's the Secretary of Education, has created this commission that's about to come out with a report on higher education. I just read a thing in the New York Times a couple days ago. There's a staff version of their report, which may or not be changed. It's very critical of higher education. I suspect that most higher education leaders will decry this report and say it's completely off base.

DB: Politically motivated.

DH: Yes, and it may well be. There are enough danger signals out there to suggest that all institutions, including the University of Montana, may have to go through a period where they are sort of refocused. The way most institutions are grown in the United States is through a period, a process of imitation. If you were at a teacher’s college, you wanted to become a state university, state college, regional college or university. You wouldn't become a national university. You wanted to have graduate programs.

Everybody is going to ultimately be a complete multi-university. It's probably not a realistic dream or system. Some institutions are probably going to need to make some choices about what they can do and do well and focus on that, rather than trying to be everything to everybody. I don’t think that’s necessarily around the corner tomorrow. I’m sure it’s an issue that will face us in Montana because it periodically has. There have been attempts, just as U of M grappled with retrenchment, maybe well, maybe poorly, there have been attempts to close institutions in Montana.

They usually were abortive. Not so much on education grounds, but on political and cultural and regional grounds. Mike Mansfield, for whom your institution is named, a great American, great graduate of the University of Montana etcetera. When the Board of Regents had a blue ribbon commission here in the 1970s, and was about to close Montana Tech, Mansfield and
some other people almost single-handedly turned that around just because of Butte and a number of other issues.

That’s happened before and it probably would happen again. The restructuring of the university system we now operate under is supposed to achieve some efficiencies in the economy by putting all of the institutions either under the MSU or U of M. I think it’s had some benefits, but unless you get at the real cost issues on a campus, and if a Western or a Northern, even with the subsidies that U of M Missoula and MSU Bozeman are giving those two campuses, just are not economically viable because of lack of population and lack of—what do you finally do?

Again, as long as the demographics are okay and there are enough students to go around, it’s probably going to be okay. If you have a declining age pool, what do you do about that? So I expect it will be a period of challenge for anybody who’s around. Any other questions or anything?

DB: No, I think that’s about it. I appreciate your time and your insight.

DH: All right.

DB: Thanks for talking with me.

DH: Okay. I was happy to talk to you, David.

[End of Interview]