William D’Alton: This is an interview with Neil Bucklew, president of [the] University of Montana, conducted on February 28, 1986. The purpose of this interview is to present a biographical sketch of Neil Bucklew’s life. It is not to dwell on his administrative years at the University of Montana. If the researcher wishes to inquire about his administrative years, I suggest they look at his convocation speech in 1981, which is in the archives of the Mansfield Library or his interview done with Bill Brown who is the editor of *Montana Magazine*.

[Break in audio]

WD: The first thing I want to go is into the childhood, as I said, and Morgantown. It’s a university town. West Virginia there. You grew up there, right?

Neil Bucklew: Yes.

WD: How did that affect you?

NB: Well, Morgantown is in some ways similar to Missoula. Their size is comparable. The mix of university, local industry are probably pretty much the same—different types of industry. Their major industry was a chemical company versus the forest products. The university nevertheless was a reasonably dominant feature of the landscape. Now, I didn’t grow up in a university-based family. None of my family worked for the university, and in fact, I’m the first college graduate of my family. But it was a family that respected the university, and you couldn’t help but live in Morgantown and know that it was there. That displayed itself lots of ways. There would be the annual science fair, and the engineers had a thing they did each year that the kids in town always liked to go to because they would do the tricky stuff with the water running out of a spigot that was suspended in the middle of the air. Those are some of the sort of memories of, you know, that the university was there. As a kid, I worked at the university. Gee, even when I was very young, I used to work at the ball games and sold pop and popcorn and so on. I never missed any athletic events. My family enjoyed athletic things.

WD: What did your dad do?

NB: My father was, at first, a coal miner, and then he got hurt in the mines. He had part of a hand cut off. Then he was re-trained as a welder and worked in the shops of the mines, and then became a supervisor and shifted to the chemical company in town. When he finally died, he had become superintendent of maintenance. He entered into sort of a middle management life, but that’s not where he started. He started as a coal miner.
The mention of the athletic things as being one of the ways the university was sort of always present. You know when you were a kid growing up, Hot Rod Huntley would have been somebody you would have admired and tried to imitate. The Sam Huff [Robert Lee “Sam” Huff] or Bruce Bosley or Fred Wyant—the football players—so those sort of ways the university was obvious and evident.

Also, another thing I did for several years, I worked at what they call the Mountainlair, which is the Student Union. They had a small bowling alley, and this was the old days when they didn’t have automatic pin-setters. Somebody had to pick them up and put them on the knot (?), and I was a pin-setter. You get paid a minor amount of money for that.

WD: So as a child, you always had the idea in your mind that you’re going to go to college?

NB: Yes. My family very much supported that, and both my brother and I went to college. You didn’t think there was any other option, really. That was the obvious option, and your family always encouraged that and you expected that.

WD: Yes. So you prepared for college in high school and you went to high school in Morgantown?

NB: Yes, I did. I did, for my first two years.

WD: Oh, okay. For your first two years?

NB: Yes.

WD: And then where did you go?

NB: I went to the University of Missouri for my last two years, and that’s where I have my undergraduate degree.

WD: Oh, I see. In?

NB: History.

WD: History!

NB: Yes, a history major, and my minor was English literature.

WD: English literature. Then automatically on to grad school, is that right?

NB: Yes, I went directly from undergraduate to graduate school, and I studied at Duke University for one year in the School of Religion. Knew at the end of that year or by the end of
that year that that was not something I was going to be willing to pursue. I then went to work for Duke University in the personnel area. That personnel experience brought me, for the first time in my life in any kind of professional way, into direct contact with labor relations matters because there was unionization occurring in the South at that time—very early stages of it. By the time I left Duke University, which was five years after I went there, I was the Personnel Director of the Medical Center, a pretty large complex, and unionization was occurring. That partially motivated me to go back for my master’s at the University of North Carolina [UNC], seven miles away and next door in Chapel Hill, where I got a degree in political science. If you look under the degree, you'll see that I did a lot of work in economics and political sciences that affected labor relations issues. That became a growing interest for me, and with the encouragement of several faculty members at UNC, I went on for my doctorate and went to the University of Wisconsin for my Ph.D. in economics, again focusing on industrial relations or labor relations.

WD: You would say that UNC, the faculty members there, played probably the biggest role in pushing you forward?

NB: In that area. At academic interests, they encourage quite a bit. A woman professor, Johannsen (?) and another professor Guthrie (?) were two people who...I was a good student, enjoying what I was doing. They both had a special interest in labor relations, wanted to encourage my advanced work in that field, helped me identify the better schools that I could look at in labor relations or labor economics. So those two individuals specifically influenced me.

WD: Let's get back to this topic of religion. You started to study religion.

NB: Yes, I did a year study of religion, a year study that I've always appreciated, thought was particularly valuable. In fact, if people's circumstances permitted it, I think a lot of people might find that to be very valuable activity. I knew by the time I was out of undergraduate school that I would not have an interest in pursuing the ministry or the more traditional avenue that the graduates of the divinity school might go or the School of Religion might pursue. I thought that I might be interested in working in the area, perhaps in some kind of pastoral counseling. But after a year, I realized that as much as I enjoyed the area of study, that for me, professionally, that was not going to be something I wanted to pursue.

WD: Was your dad and mom disappointed about you not—

NB: They both encouraged that. My father especially. I think my family was always very active in the church, and my father had been a lay minister for a long time. I think that he took some special pride in the fact that I was doing that. My father died during my year at the School of Religion. That may, in fact, I've never thought of it as a conscious thing, that that may have unconsciously released me from some family expectations. My mother would have been
pleased with that, but that she was much more interested in my pursuing what I thought I might want to do.

WD: Okay, so here you are. You’re coming out of grad school, you have your Ph.D. in economics?

NB: Yes.

WD: And all of a sudden, how do you get involved in the educational aspect?

NB: I was what was then a very non-traditional student, now, a more common type of situation. I was 30 when I finished my Ph.D. I wasn’t constantly in school. After my undergraduate experience, I went straight to Duke. Then there was a hiatus of three or four years before I started working on my master’s, and I did that as a part-time endeavor. I worked full-time. It’s sort of interesting, although I had a very valuable experience at the University of North Carolina, it was a commuting experience. I never thought of University of North Carolina as the place I was in school. I worked at Duke, you know, and I went over to UNC because the degree work there was in the right field. When I went to Wisconsin for my Ph.D., by then I was married and had three children, bam, bam, bam, during my Wisconsin days, and I had to be a provider. I had no choice. So I worked, except for the first semester where I had a fellowship but it turned out to just be totally inadequate. I worked full-time in the personnel field—labor relations field. At the same time I was getting my doctorate, I really had a very major full-time job. By the time I left Wisconsin, I was the Director of Employment Relations for the University of Wisconsin system. I spent all of my time, all of my professional time, in labor relations. A lot of bargaining. I bargained all around the state with as many as 50 or 60 different unions. I did arbitration work for representing the employer. For me, it wasn’t one of those situations where I finished my formal educational work and then said, “Now, what am I going to do next?” I was doing it while I was—

WD: You were very involved.

NB: And I had become quite involved in university administration, even though it was focused. I knew that I did not want to have a career in labor relations, as much as I enjoyed it both professionally and academically because it was always at the heart of my graduate work. I knew that I did not want to just to be “doing labor relations.” I thought I would take a teaching post. I interviewed and was seriously considering offers from both Purdue and Wayne State when a little serendipity occurred, and a man I’d worked for at Wisconsin had become the president at the University of Michigan—Robben Fleming. He got to know some of his presidential colleagues in Michigan and one of them was looking for somebody to bring on their staff to help them in their labor relations area but they wanted to use them in other ways as well. So it turned out to be a great appointment, and I went to work in 1970 for Central Michigan University for a guy named Bill Boyd [William Beatty Boyd] who was then the president of Central Michigan, later to become president of the University of Oregon. The bargain was that
I'd bring my background and expertise in labor relations if they'd open up the opportunity for me to have a broader set of administrative and academic experiences. They sure lived up to their promise because my five or six years in Central Michigan were very good years. Not only do I think I was helpful with my particular background, but it was a very much a broadening experience. I came there fairly specialized. I left there as a vice president for academic affairs and so my experience had really broadened me very fast. There was more transformation occurred during that period of time than any other place.

WD: And then where?

NB: Then on to Ohio University in 1976, where I became provost. Then here in 1981. Things have tended to occur fairly quickly for me, whether when I was 25, I was personnel director of a pretty good-sized medical center and hospital. By the time I was 30, I was vice president of the university. By the time I was 35 I was a provost. By the time I was 40, I was a president. So in a nice fashion, I really moved along the academic administrative experiences.

WD: You worked in labor relations a lot?

NB: Yes.

WD: Were you scared that when you took the job here at the University of Montana, that you might not understand the academic side of the university?

NB: No. I've never been afraid of that. [laughs] My experiences as a full-time traditional academician were limited. When I was at Wisconsin, I'd had a chance to do some traditional academic work in addition to my administrative work with the economics program there. I've taught a good bit through...especially in my Central Michigan and Ohio days, I taught a lot. Every quarter I would teach a course, at least a course, and had graduate students. I just made a real effort to do that. I also spent time as a visiting professor at both the University of Hawaii and Penn State University. In those ways, I feel like I had some academic experiences that were valuable. Plus, I have a doctorate from a first-class national university, and I don't have any reservations about my academic training. There are a number of people who've had far more academic work in the traditional terms of academic work. But when I came here, I know what it means to be a president, you know. If I'm going to be the only person on campus with academic experience and perspective, the campus is in deep trouble. I'd better be one heck of a good administrator with a sensitivity to academic issues.

WD: What is your personal philosophy on the college academia world? I mean, how do you present to a...Let's say, take an average student, how would you make him a round, good student? Is there any—

NB: There's some things that I believe are particularly important for the academic experience. One of them, I can tell from your questions won't come as a surprise, but I'm personally
convinced that the most critical element of the undergraduate experience is the general education, or if you will, the disciplined, required program.

WD: Reading and writing and—

NB: Yes, but not just basic skills. I think those are a very important element, and basic skills that are honed, developed. Not just “I met the minimum,” but, you know, “I’m good at this. I can write. I can organize and present information through a speech or through a presentation that’s persuasive and useful.” You know, “I’m not afraid of mathematics. I can deal with math. I understand the basic applications of statistics.” Those are the basic skills that I think that sort of undergird, but that’s only a piece of the action.

Another part of the general education is clearly the ability to have been introduced to and have at least a working familiarity with a broad base of human knowledge—the sciences, the humanities, the arts. To have had some feel and touch for it, so that you’re not narrow. So that you at least have developed an appreciation for the breadth that makes up the experiences of our academic life and our real life, or if you will, our daily life.

Thirdly, I think another basic element of that general education is that you’ve learned to now, by using those tools, those educated tools, using your breadth of field to be able to then address an issue in a consolidated way. If you will, an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary application because in many ways I think that’s what life’s about. It presents you with issues that aren’t simple. They’re complex. If you’re to attend to them sensitively, you’ve got to be able to think about them in a number of ways. The people who seem to think that there are simple answers to complex problems rarely influence the results very effectively.

I think a general education experience is the heart of what ought to occur at the undergraduate level. The major, that’s important. I don’t mean to belittle it, but I would say it is in many ways it’s the touch. You add that on top. If you add it on top of a shaky foundation, it’ll be a much less effective degree. I think that most people who are thoughtful and professional schools know that. They value a strong general education or liberal education.

WD: Let’s talk about the liberal arts major education. What’s happening to it now? It seems to be in a real decline. It seems 15 years ago, everybody was into liberal arts.

NB: Well you know, it’s had some return. That pendulum has swung some but not totally. I think that that we probably have experienced a structural change, not just a passing fad. I’m not willing to blame higher education for that change. There’s nothing wrong...I’m going to get to the issue. There’s nothing wrong with a job. There’s nothing wrong with a graduate of a university wanting to have a career and professional opportunities and want to believe that not only have they been well educated and trained, but that there will be an outside perception that they are a good candidate for a position of opportunity. Well, if the outside world tells you that we’re not too concerned about how well you’re educated, we’re more concerned about

Neil Bucklew Interview, OH 155-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
what your technical competencies are, then I think it gives a bad message. But that's one of the reasons I said I'm not willing to blame higher education. I think the corporate world has made a real mistake. I think they’re understanding that, but they made a real mistake in saying, “Well, we'd rather make sure that they've got the accounting competency or this competency or that competency.” So we've seen a swing, and in part because students have wanted to be employed. They've wanted to have good careers. They've not wanted to be underemployed.

WD: So are students more serious now?

NB: No, I don't think it's a question of more serious. I think maybe a question that there's been a change over a couple of decades toward a more heightened concern about the ability to be employed well. That's a shift that a lot of people can say they wish had not happened. I wish it hadn't happened, but it's happened. If my son or daughter was to say to me, “This is what I want to do. I want to be able to finish my education experience, to have had a good educational experience, but I want to be well employed and have career opportunities. I'm thinking about whether...and I want to do it in this kind of setting. I'm not sure whether I want to be a history major or a business major.”

I might have to say, “Well, I think you can have a good education under each of those tags. If you're asking me which one will the organization respond to, I may have to be sorry and tell you that the business major may open more doors than the history major will.” If they clearly are particularly students who are going to go on to graduate school, then I think we’ve found that the professional graduate schools are more open. They've never really gotten so difficult in that regard. A good political science degree or a good history degree is often seen as great fodder for a law school’s applicant. It's not always seen by General Mills as great fodder. It should be, and I think there's some change of that.

WD: Okay. One question, kind of personal question, let's talk about the power of the presidency—your power here. Are you ever hesitant about using the power or—

NB: Well, I think you need to reflect on about what power might mean in a position like that of president of a university. You have certain, more formal powers. You are specified to be in a spot to make a decision. But even in those formal areas of power, how you exercise your decision-making process is very important. You can get away in those areas with just being fairly arbitrary. I don't mean capricious but just arbitrary, “That's going to be what I want to do.” You can do that, but you're not going to gain the support for the decision. You probably won't make as good a decision, in many cases, I know you won't because you've sort of shut out advice and counsel and thought. You may have made the decision, but be thwarted in your ability to see it implemented effectively. So there are lots of reasons why the arbitrary exercise of power is just not the best exercise of power. Now, there are some decisions I have to make as president. No one excuses me from them. If I don't make them, they don't get made or they get made by default by somebody who has another perspective to make them as well as I would. I try not to be afraid to be ultimately responsible in certain formal areas. Somebody
finally has to decide who the new dean of "x" is going to be, you know? It just can't be everybody decides. Somebody's got to say, "I heard you, I heard you, I heard you. I read this, I thought of that, I met the candidates. This is the decision."

If I said, "It's going to be who I want, and I don't care what the faculty's response is, or I'm not going to listen much to it and the vice-president who has to supervise the person," that's going to be fairly irrelevant—their advice and counsel. Well, I can do it different ways but I've got to be willing to do it. Some of the things that I'm ultimately responsible for are, even though they're formally my responsibilities, are so complex that you can't exercise them that way. I could give you almost any of the major budget decisions or decisions about which building we're going to build first, which is our priority. A lot of what we do are priority questions. It could be how we budget, how we build, what are we going to seek private fundraising support for first and second and third. Somebody has to do that. I accept the responsibility for finally doing that, but in many ways, by the time I describe the decision, in most cases it's not a surprise and it's got a great deal of consensus and people don't even see it as a major announcement. It's sort of stated the obvious conclusion that we've worked toward.

There's other ways that you exercise your office, which has little to do with formal power. If I had to say what proportion of my time is dedicated to the exercise of influence rather than power—formal power—I would say it's by far an influence thing. I can go through days without making a decision per se, other than who I'm going to see at what time, but I can't go through days that I'm not attempting to influence a lot of things. Some of those are inside because I have vice presidents and deans and directors and they're responsible, and I don't try to do their job but sometimes I try to influence their decision by saying, "Well I know you got to make a decision and let me remind you that there's this perspective and there's these kind of external concerns and there's these kind of needs of the institution. You know, I'll live with the decision you make and I'll be supportive, but I want you to make sure you're calculating all the right things." I do a lot of that.

A lot of my job is sort of that same thing done in a flip way. A vice president or a dean will sit in this office, and they'll say, "Well, I'm faced with a decision, Neil. I'd like to try it out on you, I'd like to get your reactions." They're not saying make my decision, but critique it for me. That gives me a chance to influence without having to become the decision-maker. Outside the university, a lot of our relationships have nothing to do with exercise of formal power. I've got to try to persuade somebody to give to the university or to pass a law or persuade students and their families to see this as an attractive place—deal with public relations, if you will.

WD: Yes, let's go onto that. Bill Craig says, former mayor of Missoula, he goes, "I never want this job." Because like you said, you have to satisfy so many people, and he makes a list.

NB: Yes, I noticed that.
WD: Yes, department heads, Faculty Senate, essentially going on and on and on. I mean, is this part of being a politician here? How do you do that? It’s an impossible task, really.

NB: No, it’s not impossible because you do it every day. It may be impossible to do it in a way that satisfies everybody. That, I know, is impossible. I must admit that even though there’s always a piece in every one of us that wants to satisfy others—to have them pleased with our decisions—I think that by the time you become president of a major university, you can’t assume that that’s a critical part of what you’re about. I think I have even more and more come to the point where I, finally, if I believe that the decision or judgment or direction is a good one, a defendable one, that the process that we use to get there was a good one and one that I’m pleased with and not ashamed of, good decisions have a way of standing. It’s interesting. A lot of people will say, “Well, I just don’t think that’s a good decision. But I know you gave a lot of thought about it, and I know you try to be fair. It’s not the one I’d have made, but so be it.” That, you know, you haven’t pleased them but you haven’t angered them because you’ve been obtuse or unwilling to listen and inconsiderate, etcetera.

You do have a lot of different things happen each day. Those pressures from many directions are always present. I carry a card in my pocket each day of what my schedule’s going to be, and it gets changed as the day goes on, but by and large it’s in place. The diversity of it is sometimes amazing to me. I’ll start with a downtown breakfast with a Chamber Executive Committee, and I come back to sit with my staff to go over next year’s budget and to make some preliminary judgments regarding that. Then I have a grievance hearing that I have to sit in on or somebody’s been dismissed from the University. That’s followed by, you know, a class I agreed to go give a lecture in, and you know, pretty soon you realize you’re just bang, bang, bang and it’s not all the same. The diversity of it is both exciting and in some ways very draining. You have to have the ability to turn off what you just left and go on to something new.

Your question was partly was how do I cope, and I thought about how do I cope. Let me mention some of the ways I cope. Okay. One, I think I’ve got a pretty high tolerance for ambiguity, and if you don’t, I think this kind of job is bad for you. I can understand that something is yet unresolved. I can live with the fact that I wish I could get it resolved, but we’re just not there yet. There’s some new things to learn, some opinions to try to shape and influence before we can move, so I can accept that. You have learn to accept that, and I’m like everybody else, it’s nice it was clear. I’m always looking for clarity, you know, can’t we get an agreement? But you can’t always get it.

It takes a high energy level, and you really do have to have that. You just have to have the ability to keep going, and I do have a high energy level. Now, 6:30 in the evening sometimes all of a sudden I feel like I’m going to crash and then I get over that in an hour. I’ll doze off and I’ll read, and then I get up. Then my adrenaline’s flowing again.

One of the things that helps is not always seen or thought about is, if you have a group of people that you work closely with—your staff that you like—and they like you and there’s a
great deal of respect for each other, that's a very valuable resource. I have been really fortunate. This is my third major administration I've been part of, and I've been fortunate every time. I've been a part of a good, spirited group of people. One of the nice things about a group of people like that is when the door’s closed, I can let loose, and I can be angry. I can be angry at something else. I can just let it out. I don't beat up on them, but I can just be sort of obtuse. I can just say “That's stupid. We ought to do this.”

And they can say, “Easy, easy, easy. No, no. Think about it.” Everybody can sort of buffer each other. We sort of become our own padded cell. It really is valuable, and it's more valuable than I can perhaps even tell people.

I think you have to have a tolerance for a lot of opinions, and I try to do that. There's some people I don't particularly like. They're not real pleasant. They're not my favorite people but I really do try to listen to what they're saying. Sometimes, they've just got a personal problem I can't do much about. They've got a chip on their shoulder, or they got a complex that's displaying itself, or they don't like anybody who's got any authority and the problem is deeper than me. Sometimes I can't do much about it, but normally they're just angry about something or from their perspective it doesn't make sense. Or they've got a value system that's different than mine or different than others. If I’ll listen and just understand, and sometimes all I have to do is say, “As I understand, the issue is dun-dun-dun,” and just the very fact that they know you listened is valuable. Even if I say, “You know, I can’t buy that, but I understand it. I know there's arguments there.”

That alone they can say, “Well, just as long as you respect where I'm coming from. I know I'm in the minority, but if you'll just understand it.” So I try to listen when I'm in those kind of situations. I think my labor relations background helped.

WD: Right, that would be a plus. Okay, let's talk about your biggest success at the university. You consider that the general education program.

NB: Yes, as far as I'm concerned, that would have to rank first. There are some other things I take a great deal of pride in, but if I had to measure what's occurred that I think will have a lasting and important impact in the life the university, I'd have to put general education first. I don't want to claim that as a personal thing, but I really am pleased that I could play an active role in it. I think that, in fact, it may not have occurred at the pace and the rate and the way we're seeing it, if I had not taken some real personal interest in it. To be a spokesperson for it, to put resources behind it, to nurture it, to get it off dead center, because it had been for a decade. It was there but nobody was making it move, and there were some good faculty who challenged me when I came...We want to work on this, but we’ve just got to have your help and support. They followed through.

I’ll use Jim Flightner. I can still remember the day I read Jim’s letter. Jim wrote me a very long letter. He said, “I gave you a few months to settle in, but I want to tell you about an agenda
item that I just think is so overdue for attention.” It was a persuasive letter. I remember saying to Jim, “Jim, I agree with you. I’m willing to use my office and my influence and my persuasion and resources I can garner, but I’m going to need people like you who will follow through.

He said, “You got my pledge,” and he has. My goodness, he’s a fantastic follow-through. It has been important. There are others, other things that that I really take a lot of pride in. I take a lot of pride in the new Performing Arts / Radio Television building [PAR / TV]. That wasn’t even a hole in the ground when I came. It was a challenge if we could get some money raised. It’s really great to see it functioning and working. I take pride in the fundraising efforts of the university. We’ve made great, great progress in that area.

WD: Yes, we’re going to talk about those things.

NB: Okay. I take a lot of pride in that. I think the university’s a healthier university and has a stronger base of ongoing support because of those efforts. In the program area, there was a few that I’m real pleased with—the telecommunications development. It didn’t exist when I came and I think it needed to, and we’ve got a healthier radio-television academic program and a healthier outreach system because of the new telecommunication center. The Mansfield Project was just a paper idea, and it’s now a reality and I’m really pleased with that. So things have happened—tangible things.

WD: You said before you even got here and you had seen the university and then you got here, you said you were surprised by the strong traditions of the university. What do you exactly mean by strong traditions?

NB: The major tradition that I was referring to in that comment was the tradition of high quality undergraduate instruction. It’s generally good, but the fact that in an institution like this one, that’s never been a rich institution in an essentially rural western state with a low population base, it’s been able to not only do the adequate undergraduate, but it’s been able to excel at it. There’s lots of testimony to that. I’ll give you an anecdotal one. I can remember Governor Schwinden talking to a group of students on the campus and saying, “You almost don’t know how well you’re being educated.” He said, “I was an undergraduate student here. I enjoyed my professors. I really worked hard. I knew I was learning a lot, but I went away to graduate school—a doctoral program at the University of Minnesota—scared. I was the only Montana kid, and they were from all over the United States and a high power group of students.” He said, “It only took me one semester to know I was as good as any and better than most and my educational background was very strong.” He said, “I had learned to value what happened to me here only because I could see it in action someplace else.” I think that story gets told again and again and again. I don’t mean to overstate and say, you know, every one of our undergraduate students gets this premiere experience. I’m saying in the middle of our circumstances of having to deal with broad-based public, undergraduate education, we’ve been able to nurture the student who can excel.

Neil Bucklew Interview, OH 155-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
WD: Okay. Let’s talk about resources, now. You had mentioned them a little bit before. In *The Missoulian*, a math professor, Charles Bryan says, “The state has really no commitment to higher education.” What he means is, I guess, the cutting of the recent budget cuts as far as he was concerned. Then you say yourself, “I think that we have seen a long, slow erosion of the proportion of the state's budget that goes to higher education.”

NB: Yes.

WD: Is this a real problem?

NB: It is a real problem. I would not defend Charlie’s statement because I think that it’s an overstatement in some ways, although I think he's directing his comments at a frustration that ought to be felt by people. This state does not have an anti-intellectual bias. If so, I've not seen it. In the years I've been here, whether it's people I meet around the state or their elected leaders—their legislators—they value education. They understand the importance of a good higher education system. They want it for their children and their grandchildren. They know what it can mean. They take pride in it when it's done well. There's not an anti-intellectualism. Frustration at times, and if they could mold the world, it would look a little different, but by-and-large a good bit of pride in their education system.

The state's problem, it seems to me, is not one of an unwillingness or a lack of interest in higher education. It’s a growing set of demands for services where there's just more and more that people are turning to the state to do for us. We don’t just want a prison system, we want a decent prison system, and that meant we had to build a new prison because the old one really wasn’t adequate. We want a health and social services system that’s good, and health costs are going through the roof. Well, we want Montana older people to be able to still maintain good health care, and on and on the list goes. There’s more players on the state scene than there used to be, but the state's resource base has not been moving at the same rate as the demands have.

Then you add to that, the fact that our traditional economies in Montana are strained and having difficulty, and then you add a sort of a basic fiscally conservative attitude. You've got the mix for what we're experiencing, which is a state with an economy that needs help with a tax base that's inadequate. The answer so far has been sort of, let everything water down. That same requirement is sort of the way the various state agencies and universities have responded. They've sort of tried to take a little bit from everything so that they didn't have to stop doing things. Because we don't do unnecessary things, we believe. Rather than shoot one of our children we have a tendency to just say to all of them, “Well, you’re not going to get as many new clothes this year as you probably need.” I believe that the state and the university are about at the break point.

The states never funded anything real well. It isn't that they pick some things to fund well and others not. They don’t fund anything real well. I do believe that the tax structure of the state
needs serious examination. It is uneven and we rely too much on certain kinds of taxes, the absence of others. There's a reason you have a diverse tax base. It’s so that various kinds of things help carry the load, and that you don't put all your apples in one cart. We’re experiencing that right now. When I drive downtown and it says that gasoline is 88 cents a gallon, part of me feels good, but part of me realizes Montana's hurting. So we have built an uneven income stream, and now we're experiencing some of the reverberations that come from that. We do not have the tax base or population base in combination to support neither higher education nor other state services. I think that we are getting very close to the end of the place where cutting the services is the answer. I think we've now got to address the income picture.

WD: Okay. Let me pause for a second here.

[Break in audio]

WD: Okay, now as far as private contributions are concerned, you have really worked on that area, too, and brought kind of private contributions way up—alumni giving, what not, corporations. Why? What's the—

NB: Well, for several reasons. I believe that public universities deserve private support. Their friends and graduates have a responsibility to help us excel and be strong. It’s sort of a reinvestment philosophy. Someone in an earlier generation assured that this was a strong institution, and it allowed our graduates to have better lives and better careers and better families and be better citizens. Now, as they've reaped the rewards of that, they have a responsibility in my opinion to reach back and to reinvest in future generations. People know the circumstances of the state. The state will, within someone’s reasonable definition, provide us adequate resources to exist. We will not disappear as an institution, but we’ll never have the richness we need in selected areas as an institution. That will come through our ability to add some resources. There was a period when you could use major federal support to do that extension. So the research funds and so on were so great, but that doesn't look like it's going to be a major trend in the future. Private support can allow us to do the extra. I really think of private support doing two major things. It allows us to add to or extend our basic programs, and it allows us to have risk investment resources to test an idea, to do an experiment, to see if something will work before you could have garnered public support. By showing that it will work and is valuable, you can then seek public support. So you use the public support to top off.

WD: But you never want the private support to take the place of—

NB: No, I think that's an imperative. I think it's really important to never present it that way nor let that be the fact. For instance, we have an Excellence Fund program at the university which is the name for our annual giving. I have the responsibility of seeing that there are a series of areas to which those funds are distributed. I make that a dynamic process, and I tell areas, “The most you can count on is three years of support, and that will be phasing out support if it's one
of these experimental things.” I’ll use the night school program. We decided to try a night school program, and we weren’t going to be able to get the legislature to fund this for, we’re going to try to see if we could make it work. It is working, and we use private funds to really get it started. Now we’re phasing out of the private funds and moving the general public funds in behind it because we’ve got the proven product now. The marching band, you know, is another good example. It used to be funded, it’s no longer funded by the private. I don’t think that we should ever use the private dollars to take on what’s ultimately our responsibility. To extend something or to let us experiment with it, yes, but not to replace private dollars for public dollars. No one will give for that. I wouldn’t.

WD: Okay. You can be a little bit of soothsayer here. What’s the future look like for the University of Montana?

NB: I think the long-term future will be okay and in some ways strong, but I worry about the short-term. The short-term meaning the next three maybe five years. There’s a series of factors that’s going to make that a pretty tough time. The state’s economic base is hurting. We’re going through a revolution. It really is an international revolution. There’s a new economic order happening. The United States doesn’t have the place it used to have. There are other industrial nations and competing nations that are really competing. “Made in Japan” doesn’t mean bad anymore. It means good. We’re all experiencing that. We’re experiencing it in this state as well. Agriculture, forest products, mining our three traditional industries are all bothered or hurting in some way. Though there’s efforts to change that, to open up new opportunities for our economic base, to help some of the ailing matters of the old industries, but none of that happens very fast. It’s a chicken and egg. It requires investment as well, and the state’s strapped and it’s finding it hard to invest. That’s one short-term problem.

Enrollment is a short-term problem. We live in essentially enrollment-driven formula funding, and high school classes start to grow again—high school graduating classes start to grow again in in the early 1990s—but between now and then they’re not growing. They’re declining and then they stabilize through a trough and then they start up.

WD: Especially in Montana.

NB: Yes. That's another short-term problem. There are short-term things that look good. I think our private fundraising's going to continue to get healthier. We've got some new programs that are exciting. We've learned that we do not have to just rely on high school graduates of Montana for our enrollment base. Both out-of-state undergraduates and out-of-state and in-state graduate programs for development. There are things we can do to counter some of the forces that are leaning on us.

WD: It seems to me that tuition...I don’t know what out-of-state is. It’s somewhere around 6,000 dollars—somewhere there. It seems to me that would be a real plus to use to sell the school, like say, back East where most colleges are.
NB: Well, it's been a plus. There's been no question that we've been, quote, "a bargain" for a lot of people. They take an interest in the out-of-doors recreation, forestry, and add to that, the reasonableness of our cost, we've always looked attractive. But in the two-year period that we're now in the midst of this, biennium we increased the tuition fees over 30 percent. That's starting to take off some of the competitive advantage. People are having to compare us now and saying, "Well, I always thought I might like to do that, but I can stay in state. It's cheap or cheaper than I can go out." We used to be able to present an out-of-state tuition package, it was cheaper than an in-state in a lot of states. There's almost none of those left anymore. We're losing some of that financial competitive advantage that we've had. We saw our out-of-state enrollment was down this year, and I think for primary purposes, it was a cost reaction.

WD: So it's not all that dark.

NB: No, it's not all that dark. There are things about the University of Montana that give me optimism. It is a good school. It has it has a good experience to present. It's becoming even more effective in presenting it. Our recruiting admissions efforts are getting better all the time. We're working hard at that. Our private fundraising is healthy. We've got some new things that are really on the cutting edge and important. The telecommunication center is an example, and the programs it serves. The new Mansfield program is really a nice link to the international sphere where I think a lot of action's going to be developing. We've got some good things going for us. We won't get killed in the years ahead, but they're going to not be easy years.

If a couple things happen, the future can get rosier fast. If the enrollment pattern can stabilize and do some increasing, if the state will finally address the income problems of the state and that's going to mean a major tax review and probably reform, and if private fundraising continues to grow, I think those could all merge around a fairly good picture for the University of Montana. Not a rosy one, but a fairly good one.

WD: Okay, well, I just want to thank you for—

NB: My pleasure.

WD: —taking time out of your busy schedule and doing this.

NB: I enjoyed it.

WD: Anything else you would like to say?

NB: No, I don't think so. You had a pretty comprehensive set of things you've covered.

WD: Great. All right.
NB: Well, thank you.

WD: Thanks a lot.

[End of Interview]