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David Brooks: It's October 20, 2006, and I'm David Brooks, the interviewer for the University of Montana Oral History Program. Today, I'm doing the second part of a two-part interview with President George Dennison. And President Dennison, we've talked a lot about physical development on the campus, your time here and the changes or continuity that you have observed, even the development of privatization of the University to some degree. I'd like to talk a little bit more about the academic development on campus, particularly new departments and departments that you've overseen and developed, the ones that have been successful and the ones that haven't been successful and the impetus for the development of departments.

George Dennison: Okay. Maybe to just to count one final comment on the physical development and then we can go into this [academic development]. We've reached the end of space on this, as it's called, the Mountain Campus, the main campus. When we finish these facilities that we have under consideration and under construction now, or are soon to be under construction, there really won't be any space left here. So we'll have to start constructing our academic and athletic facilities on what's called South Campus. That will inevitably mean an impact on the current University Golf Course. So there's been a little bit of speculation in the press recently about the possible acquisition of an alternative golf course, and we do have an opportunity at a bargain basement price to acquire Highlands Golf Course, and that's the reason to do it. Simply to continue that opportunity for the students and the golf team and for the community so there would be low cost and good golf, 9-hole course available to them. But that's the reason for doing it. I don't know that we need to go any farther into the facilities that are planned for up here.

With regard to academic programs, we really haven't created that many departments. The array of departments that exist is not very different from what it was when I arrived here in 1990. There are two or three new departments that have been added and most of that has been recent and we can talk about those. The one that is an exception to the recent addition is the Department of Native American Studies and that came out of what was a program initially and proved to be very popular on the campus, not only with the Native American students who are attracted to the campus but to all students on campus. I think it fits in directly with what the state constitution provides, which is to make certain that we are all aware of the Native heritage that exists here in Montana far more than many other states. Montana's the only state that's got a constitutional requirement like that. So with the growth of students, and we've more doubled the number of Native America Students here, that department just made sense and I think it is doing relatively well.

Another department that emerged just recently is the Department of Media Arts. That one reflects the change in the way artists think of themselves and also a change in the technology that's available. This is the use of technology to do art. It could be anything, such as video from using CAD cam kinds of operations to design and so forth, all of that is part of what they do in Media Arts. That one is very, very new. It just got approved by the Regents at the most recent meeting. A couple of others were finalized as departments along the way. Liberal Studies, which was really a program before it became a department, rather than a piece of Philosophy and the Environmental Studies program, was very popular and it is essentially a department now. In Pharmacy there is some departmentalization that occurred as a result of restructuring from the School of Pharmacy into the College of Health Professions and Biomedical Sciences, so we have some departments that had to be established in there. Then the same things happened in Forestry. The School of Forestry became the College of Forestry and Conservation and departed from its interdisciplinary approach where everything was organized on an interdisciplinary basis within the school. Now it has three departments. But that really doesn't reflect new kinds of things; it's just an organizational thing.

Finally, the last part of organizational structure that's changed I've already alluded to briefly. In two instances we had a change from a "school" status to a "college" status. And that just simply reflects the growth of what's going on in those two schools, now colleges. There's much more breadth in the College of Health Professions and Biomedical Sciences than there was in early years and that simply reflects all of that growth. Thinking about back in 1990, when I arrived here, the School of Pharmacy was on the blocks, about to be eliminated and today it ranks, depending on which ranking you look at, fourth or fifth nationally among schools of pharmacy for its research productivity. That has been the difference and at the same time continuing to prepare professionals who enter into the pharmacy practice. They were getting a baccalaureate and now they get a Pharm.D. We have also added in, through the College of Technology, the Pharmacy Tech program, so that the retail side of it is handled pretty much by the two-year people rather than by the Pharm.D.

Same thing in Forestry, moving from an interdisciplinary approach to take into account of the increasing need for advanced studies in the areas related to Forest Management, Natural Resource Management and Ecology. That simply required a change in the way we were doing things.

Finally, one of the things, or one of the entities that I was very interested in creating on campus, was an Honors College. We had an Honors Program and early on I advocated that we change that to a college and the college would attract maybe 600, somewhere in that range, 600 to 700 students a year and these would be students who would agree to do much more than the regular student does in order to get a degree. They would graduate as honors graduates and that was a successful proposal to the Regents and it was approved and then Ian and Nancy Davidson came along and provided the money to build a facility for it. It's been very successful and it is a beacon to attract the best and the brightest to the campus. Those are, I think, the departmental and organizational changes.

On the other hand there are quite a few degree programs that have been approved. For the most part the degree programs have been at the graduate level, doctoral programs and that reflects the emphasis that I provided and I think everybody agreed with that we needed to develop the research side of the institution, research in graduate education. We have a mission in doctoral education and we simply needed more programs to do that. So at the same time we've been offering more programs and then finding ways to assure that the graduate students who entered those programs would in fact make progress and graduate rather than spend a little time here and then go off someplace else. So we've pushed the graduates for the doctoral degrees up and they average around 50 a year now, which is where we really wanted to be. But we needed a number of new graduate programs in order to accomplish that [goal]. I think we had about six or seven. You need about 15 in order to do the kinds of things that we were talking about so we've added programs over the years in those areas. Not all of them have been in the sciences but a great number of them have been and they have tended to focus in the areas of Biomedical Sciences as well as the Biological Sciences and then we've also offered or developed some new ones. One is new, the other is a resurrection of another program, a program you know pretty well, which is in History. So we have doctoral programs in History and Anthropology now. Some other people are thinking about developing one in Western Studies, which would compliment what we do in History and Anthropology, and in English for that matter, the Literature focus.

Then we've offered or developed a number of minors. There are more of them than I think I can list right now, but you can get those out of the listing of programs that have developed. But two of them are of particular interest, I think. One is the Central Asia-Caspian Basin Studies minor, which probably before too long will become a major. This reflects the interest that has developed among the faculty on the campus in studying the languages and culture and history of the republics that use to be a part of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union broke up, the Soviets just simply left and so these new republics emerged there and they go back a long time, in fact you could say that Western Civilization had part of its roots there with Persia. But this whole area there now is of great interest and I think it's going to be increasing interest. We don't know very much about the histories or the cultures or the languages of those areas. In fact there are few people who speak those languages anymore, so we're likely to push that and develop some sort of a center on Caspian Studies. But it all came out of faculty interests. The other one is an Irish Studies minor, which I wouldn't be surprised to see a major before too long also. That came with a lot of assistance from the Irish government and from people in Ireland and from all the Irish who happen to live in Montana. So it's a natural kind of thing for us to do and it's going very, very well.

We are looking at two new programs right now; maybe some of the sciences I could mention before I go on. One is a program in neuroscience, which has been incredibly successful in terms of attracting external funds to support it and working collaboratively with the M.D.s at St. Pat's Hospital creating an Institute for Neuroscience. They do the clinical science on that side and research is done at the University and then all that research is translated into practice. We do

the same thing in cardiovascular sciences but we don't have a Ph.D. program in that one. We do have related programs Biological Sciences and Biomedical Science so it works quite well without a degree program of its own. And then a new program in Toxicology, which is based really in the Center for Environmental Health Sciences and that again is in Health Professions and Biomedical Sciences and it is a very, very effective program which focuses on such challenging issues such as the asbestos problem in Libby. Then we have focused some others on Bio-Molecular Structure and Dynamics, which has a degree program going with it. This is interdisciplinary, bringing the biological scientists, the pharmaceutical scientists, the biomedical scientists, the chemists; bringing them together so that they focus on issues that are emerging in the world of medicine today. It is a very, very important interdisciplinary work that we are doing.

We have another new program that is at the master's level, a program in public health, a Master's of Public Health, which speaks to the need in Montana because there is simply is not a program available to meet the needs of people who are working in public health in the state. This one, for the most part is delivered two ways: you can get it on campus or you can get it online, so the person who is pursuing the degree can stay employed and do the degree program while staying right there, and then you can also come to campus and get it.

The two that are on the horizon right now and we're pushing very hard to get, really are renewals of programs that were eliminated before I arrived here, and those are Speech and Language Pathology – absolutely, critically needed within the state. There are not licensed pathologists who work in the schools and there is where we really need them, in addition to private practice, and we are getting wide support across the state. There have been various efforts over the years since the late '80s, when that program was eliminated—it used to be called Communication Disorder [Communication Sciences and Disorders] but when it was eliminated they did it primarily for cost reasons; that was the argument. But what it did was create a big void in the state, so we just simply have not had those professionals to work with the young people, and now it's time to get that back, so those will probably be the newest ones on the horizon.

DB: You mentioned things like “it speaks to the need of Montana to have a program” or “it's critically needed in the state” and that seems like most of these programs that you have mentioned that there is just plain need for it and you've simply made the way for it. The one that sounds like an exception, and maybe I'm misinterpreting this is the Pharmacy program. You said it was on the chopping block and you had to bring it back. How, for instance in Pharmacy, do you revive a program?

GD: Well, it was on the block primarily at the same time, primarily for cost reasons, at the same time that the Communication Disorders program was thrown out. This is the only Pharmacy program in the state of Montana, and it's been here since 1915. But it really was in sort of a state of languor, I guess would be the right word, in that period. There was no research going on, they were focused entirely on practice and not really doing too much of that. Dave Forbes,

who has been the dean since about '89, had just arrived and when he arrived he discovered there was a program review going on and it looked as if they were going to eliminate Pharmacy. Well, as it turned out, the elimination didn't happen in that program-review process. When I arrived the program was under careful scrutiny by the accrediting group because of lack of all kinds of things, including finances. So one of the first things I said was that we are going to keep this program because it's absolutely essential to have it in Montana. We are not going to have practicing pharmacists if we don't do this. I worked with the legislature and put up some money out of the institutional budget; we put up enough money to make it go. Forbes then became really engaged at that point in time and started the research process as well. We started looking very hard for external funds to help make it go. Not only donations but also research funds, and that's really been a remarkable success story. I think it continues to serve the needs of Montana.

DB: So you mentioned that the Pharmacy School, depending on whom you looked at, ranked in the top five for sure in the country. Our Forestry program is also very high as is the EVST [Environmental Studies program] and it was one of the first ones [programs]. Besides those, are there other things that make the University of Montana or the education offered here unique? I mean why would someone come here for unique reasons?

GD: Well, I think you would come here in many of those programs that you've just mentioned, the Forestry and the Environmental Studies program, because the laboratory is right out there. Wildlife Biology is probably the second or third program in the country, the doctoral program, which is a collaborative one involving Biological Sciences and people out of the Forestry College. Those students who come here to do Wildlife Biology are coming to "Mecca" so to speak because this is where it is, this is where it's happening.

I think students will also come here, and I know they come here for our creative writing program, one of the top 10 in the country, the master's program in creative writing.

Increasingly students are coming here because they want to do business and we have outstanding programs in all of the disciplines in business, plus some opportunities for the students to become involved more heavily in the use of technology. That building over there, which was constructed in the mid-'90s, is maintained in terms of technology by Hewlett-Packard and Microsoft. That is simply because our graduates. What they do is come in and change the technology every two years when it becomes obsolete. It's just a wonderful process. These students then have the opportunity to work with the most recent equipment that is available. We have the only World Trade Center that is located on a college campus, so these student have an opportunity through internships and so forth working there.

Increasingly our Art Department is getting attention. There are some really outstanding artists who are teaching in that program. In any event I think I would say it this way: any student who is looking for a challenge can get if you want to come here.

DB: That's certainly celebrating different aspects of the University. I have to imagine that in 17 years as a president, it hasn't all been celebration, that there have been tough moments in your tenure and if you would, talk about some of the few tough decisions, or some of the tough times or instances that you've had to be president through.

GD: Well, I think most of the difficult periods were those in which we found it necessary to reduce budgets during the year after a budget was already established. But that goes with the territory. You need to do it. It's uncomfortable. It does affect people but it nevertheless has to be done. You have got to balance the budget. Those were periodic, every three or four years something like that would occur until late in the period, late in the 1990s, what we did was begin to put in place a contingency fund, which is roughly two percent of our operating budget. That money is held in reserve until we know that our enrollments are where they need to be and that we don't have any other contingencies that are facing us. Then we release it and use it for whatever one-time-only purpose we need. We don't commit it to base, because if you commit to base it's gone, you can't use it again. So the next year it replenishes itself and that's made a good deal more pleasant simply by having that cushion behind us. But it took a while to develop that.

Another issue that was a bit uncomfortable, I guess, had to do with a problem that came to the surface in the late '90s. This institution, I wasn't aware of it, but, this institution like a number of other institutions across the country had begun to rely to heavily on adjuncts rather than recruiting continuing faculty when people left, or resigned or retired. Some of the deans were adopting the practice of simply "just-in-time" practice that developed in business: you appoint somebody to fill this need and then when that need doesn't exist you can move it and do something else. It's cheaper that way and also you are not locked in. On the other hand you lose a lot by relying on adjuncts. And there was an argument which developed also that adjuncts are really at the mercy of the institution so it had a chilling effect in how willing faculty members are to engage in critical discussions that you need to have, if you are going to have, if you are going to move in the right direction. They've got to feel their comments are welcome and that they're not going to get eliminated if they simply are critical of any decision. We had more than 25 percent of our faculty were adjunct appointments, or some of them had been in this status of visiting professors, and they had been visiting year after year after year. As one of the critical faculty members said, "If you've been visiting for 10 years it seems you are no longer a visitor." That had to be straightened out and I worked with the Faculty Senate to try to develop a policy to deal with it. There clearly were some serious issues involved because if you are going to reduce from where we were, down from the 25 percent number, and you are going to put some provisions in place which will make it impossible to continue to have people in a kind of visiting status for year after year, then some people who have been here for a long time are going to be affected. And they were. Those debates were pretty hot, and vehement I guess, because people understood if this policy were adopted it was going to mean that some people would lose their jobs. These people had never—who were in those position— had never gone through a search, had never been identified for a regular faculty position. In the departments where they were working, the faculty there would say they're not the same

quality and caliber as the people who get regular appointments, but on the other hand they had been there so long they were good friends. They didn't want to do anything that would hinder or harm them, which made it really difficult.

I worked with the Senate and we developed a policy and then we debated it in the Senate. We didn't go into development until after there had been a series of discussions across the campus, open forums and that sort of thing, where people were making the point that we need to do something about this. Well, I finally accepted that and I wanted to make certain that we all understood what was involved. Then we developed this policy and we had two or three Senate meetings in which it was debated. The people in the Senate who worked with me were willing to stand there with me and defend it against the critical comments that were coming from other members of the Senate and they were thinking of their friends who would be affected by this. Finally we got down to the bottom line and they said, "If we don't approve this what are you going to do?" It was a serious enough issue and an issue that I thought affected the institution enough that I said, "I'd like to have your endorsement of this, because I think it is important that we do this for the campus, but even if you don't approve it I'm going to implement it." They didn't approve it and I implemented it and we have it in place now and it has also become part of our collective bargaining agreement. I think that's a clear indication that this was something that was needed because now everybody refers to it. They think the policy is first rate and it speaks to our needs and our problems. It could probably be tweaked and improved and it will be over time but nevertheless it needed to be done. Those occasions come up from time to time. I think that's really what presidents are supposed to do anyway. You can't always be directed by what people want to say or how they vote; this is really not a democracy, it is a consultative shared governance approach, but somebody has got to make a decision and I have always believed that I'll make the decision and then let fall how they will.

DB: You mentioned earlier that programs like EVST and Forestry and Wildlife Biology, the laboratory is here and that's what makes them successful in part. There have definitely been times when that laboratory has become a political issue for the campus. I'm thinking of when the University sent a commission up the Bitterroot [to study] clearcutting. I know just even in the nearly seven years that I've been here that one of the things the Legislature gets most vitriolic about in terms of the University is those programs. It's because of the environment, the pressures on the environment, the ways people want to use the environment in this traditionally extractive state other than just for study and preservation. In your 17 years here how have you had to face that issue of having to go out and face something beyond the University, and in this case the environment?

GD: Well here's one example of that and we can talk a little bit more about it. It must have been six or seven years ago I was ambushed at a legislative session in which a group of lobbyists who represent the resource industries, raised issues about the Environmental Studies Program. Particularly the participation, they thought, of this group or groups of students from the Missoula campus who went to the Seattle when they had a teach-in against the international meeting that was occurring there, the World Trade Organization. As it turned out we didn't use

any institutional money to send people over there; that was the allegation and I could indicate that we did not. But we did support with some institutional money and with the Foundation money a conference that was held on campus that focused on environmental issues and what we ought to be doing to protect the environment. So people got very exorcised because of that, because this is a period of time in which they wanted to open up mining again. There was the big issue about the mine up by Lincoln and other kinds of issues like that and so there was a threat. What they would do is eliminate the funding for the Environmental Studies program. Well in fact, under the Constitution, the Legislature can't do that. That was a provision or the structure that was put into the '72 Constitution, which makes the Regents the final authority on these issues and the Legislature can't reach in and say, "You can't use your money for this or this or this." They just simply can't do that and the Supreme Court has upheld that in Montana in the Judge (?) decision in the late '70s.

I defended the program there, indicating what the students do and how they do it and the focus of their concerns and using all kinds of issues to explain it, and we got through that without any reduction in our funding and that sort of thing. There was a lot of debate. So what I did then following that, because I think many of these issues emerge simply because we don't talk a lot, we don't talk to people who are critical of us. And they don't talk to us, they just criticize us, and you go by each other rather than talking. So I invited these critics and the representatives of the lobbying associations to come to campus and then got the Environmental Studies people and their vice president for research and a lot of other people in the same room and started talking: What are the issues? Why do you do this? Why do you do that? As a result of that discussion I think the Environmental Studies people learned a little bit about how to approach this.

You know what they are trying to teach students to do is how you can interact to affect decisions in a way that's going to be beneficial to everyone. Nevertheless, they were presenting themselves [in a manner] that deliberately outraged the folks out there. So they learned a little bit about how they should be using different rhetoric in describing their programs and so forth. Out of that also came a series of visits between students and faculty members to areas out east where farmers and ranchers and so forth had an opportunity to interact with these students and find out what their concerns were and vice-versa. It's made a real difference. Same with Forestry; now we have advisory groups that bring these people in so they can talk to each other about this is why think this, this is why we think that, this is the direction that we think we ought to go. We have to be very, very careful on a campus like this. When we do a program we have to explain what it is we are doing, not simply attack people but explain why we are doing it and be willing to stand before somebody who will ask us a lot of questions if they don't agree with us. Which is fine if they don't agree with us, but they need to understand why we think it's important to do this. I think that's a good example of how you can get through these things, so that the program will maybe not be as widely supported as you'd like to see, but there will be an understanding of why we are doing it.

Here's another example. We have, as I mentioned earlier, on this campus something called the Environmental Health Sciences, The Center for Environmental Health Sciences. We created that and it was a wonderful thing and everybody thinks it's just marvelous that we have it because of the asbestos problem in Libby. But just think if somebody had proposed creating that center 50 years ago. What would the miners up in Libby have said: That you're putting this thing in place which is going to kill our industry. Well, that's the kind of thing that happens when you have programs that are on the cutting edge, and look at what the social consequences are going to be and what health consequences are going to be of doing these kinds of things.

DB: You know in your State of the University Address at the beginning of the year—well let me back up. The University has more and more been listed in rankings such as the *Princeton Review* or *U.S. News and World Report*, for its academics. In your State of the University Address at the beginning of the year you sort of wrapped up by saying “we can do better.”

GD: We can.

DB: I guess I want to ask, in what ways can we do better and how are we going to get there?

GD: Well, we can do better by working more closely with the public schools to ensure that the kids who come, students who come, are prepared, and we are beginning to do more of that. Our School of Education is now interacting more and I think there is more interaction between various people on the campus, faculty members and the public schools. Recognizing that it isn't just a case of coming but that it's a case of coming and being willing to make the commitment. You can get what you want here but you have got to be ready to take advantage of it.

Secondly, by focusing our attention here on the campus, and when these young people get here, we have got to be alert to when they encounter problems and help them get through and maintain them and graduate them. That will make a world of difference to how people will see the place and observe the place. If that means we need to change our admission standards in ways that will let people know that they are prepared, then let's do that. We're in the process of beginning to do that now.

We also have got to be far more attentive to outcomes. You know we make marvelous and wonderful statements about what an education is and what we expect of the people who go through our degree programs. But as I've told faculty members from time to time in various areas, it very well could be that these students go out of here and succeed, despite what we did to them, rather than because of what we did to them. So we are now at the point of looking much more closely at what outcomes do we expect and how can we assess whether the students actually achieved those outcomes? Then what is it about the curriculum that needs to be changed in order to assure that they're better at those things? That is what outcomes assessment is all about. It's taken a while to get the academy to agree that this is worth doing. But, those kinds of things will make all the difference in the world in your reputation. I don't put a lot of faith in the ranking kinds of things but I do put a lot of faith in what happens and what

we can demonstrate to ourselves about our graduates. What can they do and what do they understand?

One of the areas in which we need to be far more attentive is that our graduates have an understanding of the increasingly interdependent nature of the world and they have to be able to interact with people of different cultures without fearing difference. Recognizing the differences is a very important learning opportunity for them.

DB: So you came here at a time where I've heard the University was often called a graveyard for presidents and that the succession of presidents is fairly rapid and that there have been few long-term presidents. How have you bucked that, I mean how do you stay here for 17 years?

GD: You know I didn't even think about it a lot. I've heard that term, and I'd heard it before and I'd seen it, but I didn't give a lot of thought to that because it seems to me that if you pay attention to what the requirements are and what's happening at the institution you aren't going to have time to worry how many years I've been here. Secondly, maybe even first, I don't think anybody accomplishes very much on a campus in five years. I just don't believe it. I think it takes at least three years to understand what's going on. Then what you want to do is outline an action plan whereby you can accomplish some goals over time. But it's going to take you three years to find out what the culture is and to find out what people really will get behind. Then it takes another two or three years to get people to understand this is the direction, this is the trajectory that we are going to follow. You just have to keep on it. It simply takes time. You can't do it overnight, you just simply can not. I remember one of my colleagues who was a president of Wayne State for awhile, he's currently president of Temple, he used to say these people who are on these campuses for five years create a lot of problems and then they run off and let somebody else solve them. If you can't stay around long enough to solve the problems that you yourself create then you really shouldn't be a president in the first place. So I kind of adopted that philosophy I guess.

DB: So how many more years are you going to be with the University of Montana?

GD: Who knows? When I came here in 1990, I remember going through the interview process and somebody said, "Well if we ask to come will you stay more than five years?"

My response was, "Somebody else calls that shot, I don't." I only have a one-year contract.

DB: Well are there any other memories you'd like to share, anything else you would like to add to this?

GD: Well, I think one of the observations I would make is that over the years I've read the literature about presidents and presidencies and from my perspective this exaggerated emphasis on fundraising, how much time it takes, needs to be corrected. Fundraising is part of the job and it's also an enjoyable part of the job. If you are doing all of the other things, that is

understanding how programs are developing, and how you're serving the needs of students, then it seems to me that fits directly in fundraising because what you are doing is telling people this is what we offer, this is why you should support it and they will. I didn't go ask the Davidsons for money for the Honors College, I just told them why we needed an Honors College and what it could do and they said, "We want to do this." I think that's the way fundraising works.

DB: Great, well, I appreciate your time.

GD: My pleasure. Let me know if you need anything else.

[End of Interview]