4-5-2005

Djordje Popovic interview

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This is Tuesday, April 5, 2005 at Central Washington University. I'm Karen Blair, and I'd like to introduce a student activist, Djordje [pronounced George] Popovic [pronounced Popovich].

Djordje, would you tell us a little bit about why you came to Central, and what your background was before you became a student here?

Absolutely, I can. My name is Djordje Popovic. I was born in Germany, but I lived most of my life in Serbia; that is, until I was 18 years old, at which time I decided to dodge the draft. And then, I had to go to Hungary; and from Hungary, I came to the United States, with the help of an American journalist that I was working with in Yugoslavia, whose parents happened to live in Ellensburg. So that's the [chuckles] secret to that story.

I was raised in an activist family. Both of my parents were activists as students in the 1960s in Yugoslavia. And then also, as I was growing up, they were actively involved in opposing Milosevic, Slobodan Milosevic, who was the dictator in Serbia at that time.

Ultimately, my whole family, one at a time, we all had to leave for various political reasons. My brother followed me a year after I left, and my parents left about four years, five years after I did.

My mom is a founder of the Women in Black, which is this international feminist, pacifist, anti-war group. And because of her work, particularly because of her feminist work in organizing, she actually had to spend months in hiding, until she was smuggled out of Yugoslavia. And now, they live in Germany.

I first came to the United States in 1994, and lived for a while in Corvallis, Oregon, and then came up here to Ellensburg to attend the University.

I was a Philosophy major, a Douglas Honors College student as well. And I graduated officially, I think, in 2002. Although you may want to check that [chuckles], maybe it's -- no, it was 2002. It took me a few years, but I'm very happy of what I received here.

Would you talk a little bit about your academic interests, before we go on to your public service?

Absolutely, yes. Like I said, I was a Philosophy student. I was particularly interested in Continental philosophy, so even my academic interests sort of fit well with my activism.

I studied Marx a lot. I studied a lot of French sort of post-modern thinkers; some folks that are called Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. So in a way, even the academic base -- or, the educational base -- that I received nicely supported my activism.

I was also a Douglas Honors College student, and I'm very, very proud of that, because that sort of complemented the holistic approach to education that I received. The Honors College complemented my formal Philosophy training.

Did any particular professors reach you?
DP Oh, absolutely. My mentor was Jim Caudello [sp?], who is not here anymore. But I also worked with Webster Hood, particularly after Jim left. I also worked with Jay Bachrach.

I worked with one of your colleagues, Beverly Hackart. Dinara Georgeoleani, out of Foreign Languages. Oh, I’m trying to remember now …

KB Anybody in Douglas Honors College?

DP Well … yeah, Kelton Knight one year, I remember, and Javier Martinez de Valasco [sp?] – they were our Colloquium leaders. But the way the College is structured, we would have a different expert lecture on a different book or a different subject each week. So there was really no opportunity to actually stay with one professor for a continual time.

Oh, I’m sure I’m forgetting a lot of folks.

I probably need to say I work at Central now. I work in the Diversity Center. I’m a Program Coordinator, and I work closely with some of our brightest students now.

And one of the pat lines that I use with them, when they get frustrated with classroom work – and everyone does every once in a while – I always tell them that some of the best things, the most memorable things that they learn here, they’ll actually learn outside of the classroom hanging out with the same professors that I just mentioned.

I remember Webster and Jim would take us to conferences with them. They would work on – they would have us help them with papers that they were working with.

And relatively early on, I got an opportunity to even teach a little bit, very informally. But I just loved that, I absolutely loved that. And one of these days, I’ll probably go back to that in one way or another. So I cherish those opportunities.

KB OK, well, how did you decide to get interested in campus activities, campus politics?

DP Well, you know, last night I was trying to think about the chronology of all of this. You know, how did it all start?

It wasn’t a pre-calculated, premeditated decision. I didn’t just [claps] wake up one day and decide to do this. I think – uh – we were always working on something, whether it was Philosophy Club or a film festival or various intellectual and cultural projects that we were working on.

The earliest memory that I have of collaborating with a group of faculty that would later on – uh – the kind of partnership that would later on escalate into this thing that came close to a movement, essentially, was I think spring 1977, when I organized the second annual Videmus Lecture and Film Series; which is this film festival that I actually still organize.

And the way we structured this festival, we always had faculty introduce films for political, cultural, aesthetic reasons. And then, introduce them in the form of a lecture – 15, 20 minutes long – an introductory lecture of a sort. Then, they would show the film; and then later on, discuss the film and mediate the discussion of the film with the audience.

In 1997, the spring of 1997, we approached a group of faculty. We were trying to form – uh – I think they were called at that time the United Faculty of Central. And we basically offered them to come up with a film of their own choosing and to mediate a discussion about it.
They decided to show a film by this young, relatively unknown director. It was Michael Moore, and the film was *Roger and Me*, if you can believe that. [chuckles]

And I think Patricia Garrison, Ruthie Erdman and Lila Harper were the ones that decided to show that film, and then used it as a springboard for a discussion about changing definitions of labor, and labor organizations, and representative decision-making at the University and whatnot.

At that time, the United Faculty of Central could not, if I remember correctly, they were not recognized, so they could not even hold meetings on campus. And I think this was the first time where publicly, there was a meeting held where they were able to advertise and publicize that the representatives from this underground union, you know, faculty union [chuckles] would be there, and that they would openly talk about union issues.

Then I think I have to sort of fast-forward to … well, I think it’s the … there was a number of different, isolated cases of when this group of students that would later on come into this group, that would form this group that was called “The Students.” We were all, independent of each other, learning that something was not right here. [chuckles]

And we were here primarily to pursue our education. We were English-Philosophy-History-Anthropology majors. And we realized that some of the faculty that we really appreciated working with were no longer here. We realized that there was sort of a permanent sense of fear on campus at that time – faculty who were not tenured, faculty who were teaching what were considered non-profitable disciplines, were not sure how much longer they were going to be here.

And even if they were trying to hide it from us, it would have come across. I mean, something that would influence their working conditions to that degree comes across even if it’s not communicated.

And we realized that classes were getting bigger, for example. There were less and less upper-division classes taught. That when somebody would retire in the Philosophy Department, they would not hire younger faculty in that place. That the same thing happened in English – I think most drastically in the English Department, but also in Anthropology, and I think in History as well. Art. Music.

And, you know, we started asking questions, we started trying to put these things together, about why is it that a fellow who was studying painting, and somebody who was studying philosophy, and somebody out of the Anthropology Department were experiencing the same kinds of issues pertaining to the faculty, or the classes we could choose, and things like that.

So I think all of us, independent of each other, were coming to this epiphany that something was not – something was going on. But at that time, we couldn’t quite figure it out.

And then, we became aware – the faculty union at that time was widely supported among faculty. And ultimately, there would be a vote, and a vast majority of the faculty would indeed vote for some kind of representation.

We started hearing from our professors, from our mentors, that there was this issue of the union, and that they couldn’t even … they were even in a position to discuss this with the Administration.

And I remember going on this little trip to Leavenworth, where the Trustees were holding their retreat, and picketing along with essential faculty and union members at their retreat. Of course, we didn’t get a chance to talk with them at all; they just drove by us. We had our signs, and that was the extent of bargaining [laughing] that we were allowed to conduct at that time.
I don’t remember when that was, but I think it was after the film was shown and before the … ohmygod … I think it was the fall of 1998 when things rapidly deteriorated.

Does that – that was kind of a longwinded answer to your question but … that was it.

KB  OK, well, I’d love to know how many students got involved in this organization called “The Students,” and how it evolved. And what was your role in that group?

DP  We started going basically accompanying our friends, the faculty, to the BOT, the Board of Trustees, meetings probably in 1997 and 1998, and started, like I said, learning more about it.

And I remember a meeting, I think it was early October 1998, after … at that time, John A.P. from the Anthropology Department – I think his full name is John Alsoszatai-Petheo, something like that – he was the head of the Faculty Senate, and I think he introduced – or, the Faculty Senate voted for the union representation at that time. And that was put on the Board of Trustees agenda.

And I vividly remember this meeting, this Trustee meeting, Friday afternoon, October 7 or 8 or something like that of 1998. And I think this is where it all actually started. Because at that meeting, we all came – a lot of faculty sympathizers and a lot of students showed up for that meeting. It was probably the most to ever attend a Trustee meeting. [chuckles]

And we were hoping to, you know – finally, our issue was put on the table. We knew the Trustees would have to address it. And it all happened in 3, 3 minutes.

Somebody introduced the issue. All of a sudden, it was tabled, you know – they went through the proper Robert’s Rule of Order. And before we knew it, it was over, without even us understanding that they just actually voted for a motion, and that the faculty request was actually denied.

And finally somehow we were all looking around and somebody said, "Ohmygod, I think they just turned us down!" And they moved on to talk about planting flowers or something like that.

Well, at that point, we all got up and left. On our way out, students and faculty together, we were disillusioned, but also very angry. At that point, the group of students that was there decided to form some kind of an association. We were never recognized as a student group. It took us probably a few weeks to some up with a name, but we decided to call ourselves “The Students.”

At the core of this group, there was probably about 10 to 15 students. We were able to call protests or … pickets – we only had one march – and then we would attract anywhere from 50 to maybe 100-150 people.

The first two or three public meetings that we held had about 75 to 100 people as well. But it’s very difficult to estimate actually the number of people that were part of this. The core group was, like I said, maybe 10 folks, and we were then divided into smaller subcommittees, where everyone was working towards the things that they felt most comfortable with.

There were folks that were strictly dealing with media. There were folks that were doing research. We even had our own security. [laughing] Seems silly now. But there were different liaisons for different departments on campus.

But yeah, I think that the core of the group that was making decisions, and proposing them to a larger group of students, I think were about 10 or 15 of us, I’m not sure.
What really gave us a lot of leverage was that we managed to circulate this petition, this student petition, on campus within the next couple of weeks after the meeting, where we actually collected 1,200 signatures supporting... I don't remember the statement now, but it was a statement that sort of denounced the direction the University was going at that time, and demanded for a wider student and faculty participation in governance issues.

That was much, much harder to ignore, particularly – we were also very theatrical in the way we went about activism. So when we finally got a chance to present this petition to the Trustees, we turned it into this humungous carpet that just kept on rolling in front of them. And the impression was that there was this humungous number of students that identified with the requests that we put out there.

We had another petition, but I can talk about that later.

Twelve hundred students, it’s a ... there was about seven or eight thousand students at that time. That’s actually a very big number of students.

KB Did the other students in the corps have political or activist background like you did?

DP Yes. I remember that sometimes we would talk about what our parents had done. And I think we’re all kids of folks who grew up in the 1960s, so it would come up every once in a while.

I’ve lost touch with most of the students, but I know that a few of them are still active, you know, in the anti-globalism movements or with some local issues. And obviously, you know, they live all over the Northwest in the country now.

KB Would you say some names of some of them?

DP Yeah, Gina Wade [sp?] later became my wife. [laughing] Stephan McKinney [sp?]. Winnifred – uh – Winnie Gray [sp?] was really the second-in-command. Winnie and I basically ran the whole thing. Eric Steiner [sp?], I think, was the Art major. I can’t remember now ...

KB What kind of budget did you have?

DP Well, we had a budget. We had a budget and [laughing] ... we were incredibly well organized. We ran all of our operations out of my wife’s and my apartment at that time.

We had our own mailbox, our own phone line, fax. And we had a budget, because there was a lot of obviously propaganda that went into this work. A lot of printing, sign-making, and a little bit of traveling even.

We were financed by faculty, basically. And all this went under the table. I was the only one – and I think to this day, I’m the only who knows who actually contributed money and how much money they contributed.

And there was – this question came up a lot, because I think there was a somewhat professional look to what we did. It was very surprising to see students that were organized to that degree and were able to put their hands on that kind of material.

We had people who were actually studying P.R. doing P.R. for us. We had folks who were artists, like I said, doing posters for us. So it all looked very good, but it also looked like it cost
money; and the money did indeed come from faculty and, I’m sure, from a few of us students as well.

Of course, when we first organized ourselves, the first thing that we published was a manifesto – considering that I was a Philosophy student, it only seemed appropriate. [laughing]

And this manifesto outlined about six or seven complaints that we had, and then about five or so demands that we made, and I can go into those later. At the very end, the manifesto called for a vote of “no confidence” in President Nelson. And also, ended with the lines “CWU Students and Faculty United.” [laughing] Which, again, I think I was the one that wrote that! I’m giving my biases here.

The reactions were – everybody was surprised at that time. We widely distributed it across the campus. And I think there was surprise for a number of reasons.

Nobody expected a group of students, particularly a group of students that they couldn’t identify, to come up with a document that was assertive, and also that was quite literate. It was well written and all of our collected wisdom – we were kids at the time, but all of our collected wisdom went into this document.

They also did not expect to encounter students who were willing to do something about this. I remember each of our demands started with words “We demand” – which, of course, nobody says here anymore – “and we will act towards a wider participation in government.” And the last one of those was “We will act toward a vote of ‘no confidence’ in President Nelson.”

Also, it was the first time that that phrase was heard publicly. By that time, we had heard our faculty friends talk about it at parties or meetings and whatnot, but nobody had actually said that. It was an article with this phrase. I don’t think the Administration even knew this was on the radar.

And then a group a students who were – at that time, the Administration had a rather patronizing look at students, and I can get into that in a second; because that cut into the essence of what we were asking for.

They had a patronizing look at students and they simply did not expect students to be able to put something like this together, to be able to organize themselves, and to be able to assertively ask for something.

It also drove them crazy that we did not reveal our identities. They were able to – a few weeks into it, they were able to ascertain who a few of us were. I mean obviously, our spokesperson was giving interviews. Our … sympathizers, or members of our group, were circulating that petition. And I was the one demanding various documents and going through whatever official channel existed at the time to get the documents we needed.

So they were able to put it together that there was a few of these people, but they were not quite sure who the students were. This was a collective now and afterward and they were not sure – I don’t think they were expecting anybody to come up with something like that.

We only came up with the name because we couldn’t think of anything else. [laughing] But we purposely hid our identity. And we did that because there was a group of students, particularly out of the College of Education Professional Studies, who were going to teacher training, or who would at some point have to be certified; and they were the ones who were mostly concerned. And rightly so. Later, we would realize this, shortly thereafter.
And also, we realized that the Administration was also hiding behind abstract concepts at the time. They were talking – this is going to take me to the what the idea behind the whole protest was – they were talking about this “new direction of higher education.” They were talking about the “changing future” and the necessity of the University to “answer the needs of the changing marketplace.”

They were never saying, “I, Ivory Nelson, think that this is the case.” No, they saw themselves as these prophetic figures, who were transitioning the University into this, you know, mythical 21st Century, where all the education will basically be commercialized.

So we tried to reflect, or to mirror, their way of thinking. But of course – by “they,” I mean the upper echelons of the Administration – but of course, it was very disconcerting and discomforting for them to know that there is the group that doesn’t – refuses to identify itself and that it’s also capable of militancy, or somewhat militant things at that time.

Following the publishing of that first manifesto, we … no, actually, let me … go ahead.

KB Well, I’ve got lots of questions for you. One of them is about the dynamics of the group itself. You speak as though there was consensus about the problems and the solutions and so on. Is that so, or was there a variety of opinion, as with any organization?

DP There was a variety of opinion. And it was sometimes difficult for us to reach consensus, particularly strategy. Some of us were more militant or gung-ho than others. They were ready to do sit-ins right away.

The rest of us wanted to go through the [interrupted, tape recorder turned off] about our decision-making process. You asked me about the dynamics of the group.

They were many, many nights when we stayed up all night, figuring things out. We wanted to – we never wanted anything to come to a vote; we wanted to go by consensus. And we kind of succeeded in that.

I know that along the way, we may have lost a couple of folks, but we had gained many more. And the ones that we lost – in spite of the fact that to this day, there are folks on this campus that associate me in particular, and then all the students who were associated with this, with this radical concepts – it was actually the more radical students that left us. Because they thought we were just wasting their time, like I said, we should take over the Administration building or Barge Hall right away, and start petitioning for change.

Now, we were capable and willing to do that as well, but strategically we thought it would be better to sort of … what’s that phrase in English? … give them enough rope. [laughing] And I think that ultimately, we did that.

Also, our faculty friends at that time were very, very helpful and supportive. I mean, many times they would actually come to the student apartments and help us work through this issue.

Or they would – they did a lot of editing for us, for example. We would come up with these documents – I will talk about those later – and then we would have [inaudible] faculty members look at and sort of tell us what their read was, and what were the things that we could do better. This was this incredible educational process, or experience, for all of us that were involved with this.
So, in a way, this governance of this group provided a model that we thought would be appropriate for the University to follow. I don’t know how realistic that was, but I think we were good at it at that time.

We also lived this, you know, this was our … everyone was almost flunked out of school while this was going on. [laughing]

KB What did you see as the major set of problems, or individuals? You have spoken of President Nelson.

DP Yeah.

KB Do you see him as …?

DP No, it wasn’t about individuals. It wasn’t about … that was the first big discussion that we had as a group – tying this to the previous question that you asked – was about what is really the core of this. And it wasn’t President Nelson, it wasn’t the Board of Trustees, or any one of the administrators at the upper level.

It was this culture at the time, the idea that somehow they have all subscribed to. And I think they have all believed it. And that’s the idea of sort of a commercial … [stammers] … I can’t say it.

KB Commercialization?

DP Say it again.

KB Commercialization.

DP Commercialization of higher education, you know.

KB What does that mean to you?

DP Well, I remember at the time, all of a sudden, the Administration stopped using the word “students.” Which is another reason why we called ourselves “The Students.” They started referring to us as the “customers,” you know, we became the “customer-student” or just the “customer.”

Education wasn’t education anymore. It wasn’t about these liberal ideals; it wasn’t about the pursuit of knowledge; it wasn’t about free inquiry and expression. It became the product.

And what became emphasized at that time was the efficiency of the delivery of this product. So they wanted students to go as fast, or as quickly as possible, through their education. They wanted – I think one of the phrases that he used was this “value to dollar” thing that, you know, you invest in this as if it was an investment or product, as if you were purchasing something tangible. And then in three years, you know, in four years, you’d matriculate and then you’d go out there and you’d get a job.

Obviously, when you have a picture like this of education, there is very little understanding for areas or departments such as English Language and Literature, or Foreign Language, for that matter; Art, Music, Philosophy, Anthropology, History.
Like I said, those were not profitable areas, and that’s why those departments were shrinking at the time. And the departments that were growing, other than the bureaucracy itself – we were able to produce these numbers where I think they were seeing a 20-to-30 percent increases in the upper Administration, in terms of new personnel that was added to the payroll; where the only increases we actually saw in the faculty were the non-tenured track, the adjunct faculty, who were completely mistreated obviously at that time, and perhaps still are.

I remember one of the most poignant slogans that we used had something to do with “If you wanted to catch up in terms of percentages, and hire proportionately as many faculty as you did as administrators this year, you’d have to hire 68 people, 68 faculty, right on the spot.” [laughing]

But it was this notion – and it was probably national at that time – it was this notion that traditional education as we had known it was a concept that was antiquated, and that in order – Ivory Nelson used to use these kinds of comparisons in order for us to keep up with the trends – he’d take it from the University of Phoenix and some other … oh, what are they called? … Web site- or Internet-based universities – we had to invest in distance education, we had to divest from this land-based, traditional … students and faculty living together, talking in smaller settings about things that had no market value whatsoever. Like literature, pursuit of knowledge, or foreign cultures, or diversity, for that matter.

Actually, the first department that Ivory Nelson closed was the Ethnic Studies Department, which was the ultimate irony of this whole situation. And I cannot remember the name of this professor, but many of the students who were associated with this actually worked closely with that professor.

So this was obviously in the making for a while.

KB So what were the solutions that you proposed?

DP Well, this is it. The first solution, before we even got to the solution, we had to – our belief, our view, was that we had to change the Administration at that time. I think they thought that was a radical concept at the time. But what we demanded – well, here, from our manifesto, our the five points that we – or, the five problems that we articulated.

We said, “Professors and students are systematically excluded from all formal decision-making processes. Under the pretense of free speech and equal participation, the Board of Trustees and the Administration solicit our opinions, yet our opinions are never sincerely considered or respected.

“Number 2: Decisions of the B.O.T. and the Administration rarely coincide with the positions of students and faculty.

“Number 3: By this treatment, the Board of Trustees and the Administration have produced an environment detrimental to learning. They have generated feelings of discontent, fear and apathy among both students and professors. Most importantly, they have failed to respond in an informed and responsible manner to our concerns.

“Number 4: The B.O.T. and the Administration act on a conception of education which is harmful to faculty and students. In this atmosphere of suppression and mistrust, the B.O.T. and the Administration have failed. They have obstructed the very foundation of the University.
“Number 5: The B.O.T. and the Administration have reduced faculty to the status of producers, and the students to products, taking away our humanity and our voices. Education has lost its potency.”

So these play on the governance issues, the shared governance issues, the ability of both students and faculty to participate in a discussion that was to sort of determine the future of the University, and determine the conditions under which we would teach or learn here. And they also deal with this predetermined notion of where history was going to take us, and what this University is going to look like, and what our roles were going to be, under the corporate notion of education. Does that –

KB Would you care to speculate about how this administrative philosophy developed? What were the forces that brought that together?

DP Well, like I said, I think this wasn’t strictly a local, or a problem that Ellensburg or Central Washington University found itself in. I think this was national.

And when … one of the … I briefly mentioned earlier that we developed these three, just call them research positions, I guess – the students, that is, developed them. And one of them was our response to the vision, mission, goals statement that the Board of Trustees with Ivory Nelson’s blessing proposed right around this time.

And this is ultimately what basically earned us a lot of respect and a lot of cachet in the community. We were able to document that they had actually plagiarized, and ripped this vision, mission and goals statement out of – you know, I don’t even remember the names of the authors anymore – but out of this self-help pop … I don’t want to say crap books [laughing] that were circulating in those times.

And also, these magazines that sort of looked like they came out of a corporate boardroom, basically, that they all read at that time. And unfortunately, I can’t remember any of the names anymore.

But this was the lingo that was sort of … it was part and parcel of the entire shift in thinking, not just about a university or universities at that time, but also any kind of public sector. You know, in order for the hospitals to work, they all have to be privatized. In order for universities to really work, well, they were not quite there to say they all have to be private or market-driven, but we clearly have to do away with the programs and the parts of a university that cannot directly contribute to the delivery or to the processing of this product.

So I think it was national, I think it was happening. And it’s still happening. You still hear these kinds of sentiments. I mean, I remember hearing even President Clinton talk about this, you know, “our changing future of society.”

Of course, the history, or not the history but, you know, all of them were swearing into the market at that time. They were all swearing into these high-tech things that were happening at that time; which, of course, all resulted in a big bubble which burst a few years after this happened. But at that time, nobody could even question those types of things.

And ultimately, if I had to speculate on where this comes from, it comes from there is a deeply rooted anti-intellectual sentiment in this country. And I think that’s where this comes from. This distrust that people, the public, or the decision-makers have of intellectuals, who happen to, you know, be at the universities.
And also … this ties back to my upbringing also. I grew up … in spite of the fact that I grew up in a very … for part of my childhood, I lived in a very totalitarian, very controlling society, there was always a notion of the autonomous university. Milosevic, even at his worst power, could never do anything with the university. He once tried to enter the university and there was a riot afterwards – I mean, his police tried to enter the university.

The state, while it understood it had to invest in higher education – education in general, but higher education in particular – also understood historically, in Europe at least, that it had to … what is the word? … allow the university to be self-governed; that basically the professionals and the universities, the students, are going to be the ones who are going to make the decisions about the curriculum, about the directions of the university, about what is going to be taught and whatnot.

Now, this is a weird concept in the United States. I mean, to this day – even today, for example, you hear demands for a more balanced curriculum that would sort of reflect the thoughts and the politics and the values of the people who are paying for this University, i.e., the taxpayers.

So I think it goes back to the anti-intellectualism in the United States. And also, the academic freedom, or the autonomy of the university, was never fully developed here as it was elsewhere perhaps. I don’t know. That’s … I don’t know, that’s a big thought. I’m not sure I can substantiate it either. [laughing]

KB What are the results that the students were proud of, and what were the actions they took that were not, in their minds, as effective?

DP Well, we are … you know, when I read through the demands, basically every single one of them has been in one way or another answered. Some of these demands had to do directly about the way we as a student body – the way, for instance, this small group of committed and conscientious and dedicated students – thought about ourselves in the way we as a student body thought about ourselves. And also, the way the faculty viewed education.

So a lot of these things didn’t have to happen. These were not demands that had to be granted by Administration. In other words, nobody’s going to be – you don’t have to be a product if you don’t think of yourself as a product. You can make education as free as possible – now, knowing that there could be ramifications of the consequences later on.

But I think at that time – and I’ve heard many students and faculty talk nostalgically about that time, because there was definitely a vibe on campus at that time. There was this feel of … something happening on the edge. All of a sudden, we started thinking more about these ideas, we started talking about them more. And we weren’t necessarily … We also started living as a community, or became closer to each other.

So those things happened regardless of whether the Administration granted any of our demands or not. Obviously, we were able to force the President, and then later his entire Administration, out.

Like I said, the first time this manifesto was published, we were laughed at. Nobody took us seriously. And it would be about a year after that that the President would actually – less than a year – the President would announce his resignation.

And then, an ultimate troublemaker would sit on the search committee that was selecting a new President. So that was the most concrete outcome.
And I think what we were able to change – and this is kind of in between something that is grantable by the Administration, and something that we as a community, could sort of bestow on ourselves – we were able to understand that this reality, this future that the Administration was talking about at that time – as a cause of this, not existing independently of us, you know – they presented us with this idea of the future, this prophetic notion of what the future was going to look like – we shut it down and the future didn’t happen.

That, again, was one of the hardest things for me to communicate to my fellow students at that time. In other words, that we played an active role in creating the society, or the campus, that we wanted to be a part of.

And I think people got a little bit closer to that notion, you know, the notion that they mattered. That I’m sure there are other things that can go wrong, and you can pay for your activism and whatnot. But ultimately, whether we are granted the rights to participate or to voice our opinions or not, our actions matter.

So that was something that I think has changed since then. I wish it could change nationally [inaudible] as well, but it will take a lot of little rebellions [chuckles] like this to change the whole thing.

OK, the thing I’m mostly proud about is the way that this group of students came together, and the way we played this, in a way. And I’m going to go into some of the details about this game that went back and forth between us and the Administration.

The question that anybody would ask: If the Administration was not willing to consider your demands, if they wouldn’t listen to you or even acknowledge you existed – as a group of students with 1,200 supporters, and hundreds of people who were actually involved in this group – how did you communicate with this group?

Well, we communicated through media, we communicated through mass emails, through protests. We basically forced them to listen to us. And this is why a lot of times we were characterized as a “radical” group, and spoiled kids who were “antisocial” and “didn’t know how to be nice.”

But we forced a group of people who were probably, at that time in their – at the time of their might – we basically forced them to something, to change the direction of the University that wasn’t really on their agenda at that time.

One of those isolated incidents that I talked about originally – you remember there were two buildings, two big buildings that were being dedicated at that time? One was the Science Building and the new Black Hall. Governor Locke was in town, all the Trustees were here, key people from the HEC Board.

This was the biggest day in Ivory’s life. I mean, he brought this capital budget money to campus, and they had this – and was going to – uh – what’s the word for this? – commence, or open these two new buildings.

But that day, I showed up with this humongous sign, just the biggest sign that I’d ever made on a stake, that read simply “Is this just a façade?” And I stood behind Ivory Nelson and Governor Locke everywhere they went that day.

Of course, it was in all the news afterwards. You couldn’t see who was holding the sign but it didn’t really matter. There was this huge sign that said “Is this just a façade?”
And it was a perfect backdrop to what was going on at that time. Because, again, Ivory Nelson was talking about this “bright future,” he was talking about this University that’s “turning the corner,” at a time when faculty couldn’t take care of their families. They were leaving. The students were in big classes, and we were not quite getting the type of education, that personalized education that we were selling.

(Transcription of Side 2)

DP  Now, that digression has something to do with what I was talking about earlier?

KB  You said you were proud of this.

DP  I was proud of how we played it. You have to take this out of the tape because I've totally lost my train of thought now. [chuckles]

KB  It sounds like you used the media pretty effectively. Is that …?

DP  Yeah, but before …

KB  Were there student demonstrations when Locke – the Governor – came to dedicate these [inaudible]?

DP  No, this was the only thing. And there was – actually, the campus police tried to get me away from the President. Because this was a big day, like I said, in his and in the University’s life and I was ruining the picture.

So later on, I had to hook up with the local ACLU, and they were walking around the campus with me. So every time I was approached and asked to leave the campus or put my sign down or whatnot – all of which the police has apologized to me for since – I would introduce them to either the ACLU students or to the ACLU advisor at that time. [chuckles] So they had to deal with people who were sort of – they were paralegals – people who were trained to protect … well, the First Amendment, and the freedoms guaranteed to us by the Constitution, and also academic freedom. So that was convenient.

But I guess what I was saying earlier, I was very proud of how we played it at that time, and how we sort of asserted our role. Speaking of that sign I was carrying, there were a lot of people that did approach me at that time, a lot of our supporters, faculty, were just very happy with that.

But also Dauwalder, the Provost at the time – Vice-President for Academic Affairs – was the one who approached me, looked at me and said, “Do you even know what a façade is?”

And actually, when that happened, I was convinced that these people had to go. Because the chief academic officer on campus is belittling a student, or pointing to the ignorance of a student, whose education he was ultimately responsible for. I mean, it was a bizarre thing going on all around.

When they started responding to – they were shocked at first, and angered also. They were confused and didn’t know who exactly these kids were. And when they started responding to us, when they sort of figured out some sort of organized response, it had to do with things like, well, first we were not the official representatives of the student body.
There was a student government that was elected to represent the students. Obviously, the student government supported the Administration at the time, and we couldn’t even meet with them. The last things they were supporting at the time were student interests, essentially.

The second petition, I mentioned earlier, was the RICO petition for one of their key officers, which we had half-completed. So every time they wouldn’t listen to us, we’d present them with a [laughing] petition, and it sort of created a little bit of flurry for us.

The second response from the Administration was that if we continued with our actions, if the students and if the faculty continued with their demands for a union and their insistence in voting “no confidence” to President Nelson, we were going to jeopardize our accreditation at the time. It was, in particular, the accreditation for Education and Professional Studies, but they presented it as the accreditation for the entire University.

The first research paper that we wrote was in response to those claims. It took us about four months to gather all the documentation on the last accreditation process, and then some time to put all this together.

But I still remember the day when we actually published that response. And our email and phone, we were just inundated with this great response from faculty who were actually proud, because we were their students; we were a reflection of this education that they were providing.

And I think they were proud, and also we basically armed them with something very, very potent. And what was it? Well, they claimed that in 1990 or 1991, when the College of Education lost its accreditation here, that that supposedly happened because of the vote of “no confidence” directed to Provost Edington.

It was a long ago at that time, you know, obviously none of the students were there at the time, so we had to go back and find some documentation and figure out whether that was actually the case. We didn’t even know what NCATE was or what accreditation meant.

We couldn’t get the documents officially. Fortunately, at that time, we were already starting to see some of the people in the Administration jumping ship, and we actually had someone leak those documents to us out of Barge Hall itself.

We continued to request those documents through official channels, which went through the Dean of Education of the College of Education at that time, and some folks out of Contract Services, Business Services, where the records were kept.

And we just received the regular shuffle, you know. “The documents are not online.” “They were destroyed.” And when we received the actual documents, we knew exactly what we were asking for. So we would actually ask; we had them, but we were still interested in getting them officially.

So we would say, “We are asking for a letter written by the Chair of the Accreditation Board.” I forget the original title. We were asking for what the University wrote in response. We were asking for “What are the criteria that the University failed at that time? Why was their accreditation denied?”

And these were documents with their name, you know. They have their names, the date and all that stuff, written by people obviously. And ultimately we had to – they did not know that we had the documents, and were not willing to give those out to us.
And ultimately we had to threaten them with a lawsuit and the taking over of a building and whatnot. And I don’t think we have ever received those documents.

But what we did do was publish a response to the claim that if we continued with our activities, we were going to jeopardize the degrees of every single student. We realized that in 1990-1991, the vote of “no confidence” actually happened after the accreditation was denied to the College of Education. And also that some of the criteria that the University failed at that time were very similar to the conditions that were still prevalent at that time at the University.

In other words, the accreditation agency, or body, was talking about large class size, faculty loads. They were talking about advising, which was not built into the teaching loads at that time, which directly dealt with the problems that we were articulating, outlining and trying to get Administration’s intentions on.

So we were able to turn the tables on them, and basically said – in this document we wrote, it was maybe 25 or 30 pages long, I don’t remember – we were able to tell them that “Not only are you not correct in your assumption that we are jeopardizing the accreditation process right now” – 1999 or 1998 – “you are actually the ones that are jeopardizing the accreditation. And unless you change, unless you meet the demands of the faculty and the students, we certainly are not going to be accredited.”

And then we also made sure that we forwarded that document on to the accreditation agency. And, of course, this drove people crazy. This was part of the reason I was actually told personally – and, I think, in writing as well – that when I first asked for these documents, that this was an “inappropriate time” for me to be asking for these types of documents.”

Which, on a side note, attests to the arrogance of that Administration, because they really thought that they could get away with comments like that.

The second research thing that we did was, like was mentioned earlier, was a response to the vision-mission-goals statement that the Board of Trustees and Ivory Nelson tried to use at that time. We were able to document that the information was not [interruption, tape recorder turned off].

Knowing that the ideas were not original, I mean, they didn’t have to be original, but they were taken from the worst sources. I think Jim Brown out of Political Science recalled that he referred to those books and articles and those corporate journals as “pap,” which is when I learned the English word pap. [laughing]

But nobody at that time had enough time, or were able to make that connection. We actually tied it back to like I said [tape skipped] to our rights of students and the rights of faculty being … ohmygod what’s the word? Denied or …

KB Ignored?

DP Ignored or violated. And we drew – everything we asked for, we drew out of the mission statement that we had at that time and have had for a long time.

Now, in the middle of this, the Board of Trustees decided to change the mission statement, the vision-mission-goals statement, and supposedly solicited faculty opinion, but providing them with three options for them to choose from, all three of which emphasized corporate – uh – emphasized the production of the “product” of education.
And we didn’t think – we thought it was very inappropriate for them to take away the one … what is it called? I’m having a really hard time with English … the one thing that was used as a foundation for most of our requests, i.e., the mission statement that we already had, that I think was talking about the optimal conditions for teaching and education, and was talking about small class sizes; it was talking about the respect; and it was talking about the fact that the Administration actually works for the faculty, represents the faculty, not these future realities.

And so they were trying to change that and change it with stuff they were taking out of corporate magazines basically. And we were able to expose that; and again, the faculty were able to use some of that information.

So I think the thing that I’m mostly proud of was our ability to sort of play along, and to answer the challenges, and to act like we all had some experiences with this, whereas we really didn’t, you know. [laughing]

KB Would you have done anything different? Were there some disappointments?

DP Yes, we were at times – and I don’t know who was responsible for this, whether it was us or the people that these things were directed at. I wish we were more clear about these weren’t personal attacks.

Now obviously, they were personal attacks. People lost their job and folks in the Administration were forced out, so I guess there was something personal about it. But we were not doing that because we did not like this person, the Provost or whoever it was, as a person. It was a battle over where we saw the future of our University and our education.

And I wish that we were able to emphasize that more, because there was a lot of feelings that were hurt at that time. So I wish that we did that better.

KB Were there costs to the student body in general, to the members of the group, to the University?

DP Obviously, folks out of the Education Department, like I said, had a very good reason to be. And we were able, to a large extent, hide their identities. Sometimes they’d have to distance themselves from the group.

The rest of us, our grades suffered at the time, because obviously we were living and breathing this. But not really. I had to have a couple conversations with the campus police, but that’s not … it made it fun. [laughing]

KB Now, so the students must have celebrated when Dr. Nelson resigned from campus?

DP Yes.

KB Can you talk about how on earth you were selected to join the Search Committee for a new President of this University?

DP That’s right. So I don’t remember the exact date, but it was the winter of 1999, I think, that Ivory Nelson informed the committee that he was retiring. And we were happy, obviously. It was the first solid victory that we’d gained.

But it wasn’t about him. It was, you know, the same Board was in place with the same ideas. Later on, we realized that the Board didn’t really – they were being fed stuff from the
Administration as well. And there was more that had to change than just the President of the school.

But it could not have happened if he hadn’t resigned, so yes, we threw a huge party, if I remember correctly. [laughing] And I remember the union folks were happy, in spite of the fact that they were still not able to bargain with the Administration.

And at that time, obviously, all of our talk immediately turned to “What's next?” We would have to go and hire a new President or seek out a new Administration.

Then the Trustees suggested what the structure or the set-up of the new committee that was going to be entrusted with this quest of looking for a new President was going to be. Immediately, we were disappointed. Because if I remember correctly, there was maybe 12 to 15 of us on that committee, and there was almost as many Trustees on that committee as faculty.

There were representatives of the Alumni, and the University Foundation, and also a student representative, which we knew was going to be an official student representative at the time. So when we did our math, we realized that regardless of who gets appointed on behalf of faculty, and civil service, and maybe some of the exempt folks, we weren't going to have the numbers, the votes, to be able to do anything.

And I don’t know whether somebody has actually communicated that to the Board at that time. The students were demanding for one more student representative at the committee. And sort of everybody was jockeying for position at that time.

And somehow, the Trustees at that time, agreed to a second student position. The first one was given to the President of the Student Body, I think, at the time. And the second one was offered to me, the face—or one of two people, or one of a group of people, responsible for much of the mayhem on campus that year. [chuckles]

And I didn’t know what to do with that, I have to be honest with you, because that’s what we were asking for. We were asking for shared governance, we were asking to be involved in the decision-making process. And what better opportunity to have a direct say, you know, be one of the 15 votes or 12 votes on the committee that’s going to determine the next President of the University.

So, on its own, the idea was—you know, we got what we wanted. But I wasn’t willing to be the pawn in anybody’s game either. And I didn’t—the numbers just didn’t add up. I didn’t want to—I knew that adding a troublemaker, adding somebody who clearly comes from the other side of this issue to the committee may legitimize the committee in the eyes of people at least from my group.

But I didn’t want to just sit on a committee, didn’t just want to be somebody who’d never be taken seriously, and who’d cost [inaudible]. So I had to think hard about that. And it was the folks in my group, and some faculty members, that basically talked me into it. And they said, “This is what you asked for. You’ve got to follow it through.”

And there was a learned opportunity, or learning experience, for me. Because I think it would have been easier, or safer, at that time for me to just say, “No,” and to pretend that I can anticipate exactly what is going to happen. And for the sake of my inner peace, just say, “Well, I’m not going to be part of something that I can’t control.”

Again, I had to learn that it wasn’t about groups, it wasn’t about doing only things that you can control outright. I either had to—that if we were asking them to compromise, then we had to
compromise ourselves. [chuckles] So it was a great learning experience, something I'll probably cherish for the rest of my life.

So I agreed to do that. I think after that, the faculty representatives were selected, or appointed, probably by the Faculty Senate, I would guess. And then a few of our friends got on it as well, and I felt better. [chuckles]

And when we looked at the makeup of the committee, it was evenly split. And then going in to – both sides at this point realized that we had nothing to gain if we continued with our quarrels, at this point. That regardless of who was right, regardless of who said it first, we had to compromise somehow. We had to learn how to work together.

We also realized that – this was a key point – that even if we came up with the best President on the face of the earth, it would not really matter to this University, considering the conditions the University was in, if the process did not reflect that.

So the process had to be full of integrity, had to be transparent. And it had to be structured in a way that would be guarantee that there would be, you know, a sense of ownership or participation from everyone on campus.

With that being said, we also realized that it was going to take us forever to do this, because we didn’t – the President was forced in the middle of this vision-mission-goals statement. So we didn’t have the old mission, we didn’t have the new one.

It was clear to everyone – it would have been clear to anybody coming to campus that the campus was indeed in a state of turmoil. So we had to come up with how – we had to write, temporarily, a new mission statement. And we had to figure out how we were going to write a job description, how we were going to describe ourselves, how we were going to answer the questions about the events that preceded the search.

And that took … in my recollection, in my memory, it took quite a few months. It took a lot of research, a lot of work, a lot of compromising. And like I told you, yesterday when I was going through boxes of my files about this, I found essays on the history of liberal education, and even the Port Huron Statement that apparently we used at that time to figure something out, I don’t know. But from the get-go, we learned how to work with each other.

Oh, one thing that I forgot to say. When I was appointed to this, I immediately sent out a campus-wide email asking people for input. And this went to faculty and probably other folks on campus. And I sort of maintained that stance throughout the whole search.

I even went to the Ellensburg Community Chamber and to the galleries and whatnot. There were some events, I can’t remember. I think Diane Tasker was the head of the Chamber at that time? I can’t remember. Because they did not have a representative on the committee. And they probably should not have had a representative on the committee, but apparently the last time the University went through a similar type of a process, they did have a representative.

So the City was up in arms over the fact that there was – that they felt marginalized or sidelined in the process.

So I went to them and said, “I’m a student representative. I’m primarily going to represent the student interests, but I can, as long as you’re interested and not opposed to this, I can certainly represent yours as well.”
And they just couldn’t believe that [laughing] that somebody would walk down there and sort of offer them services! So I tried to maintain an open relationship with the folks downtown as much as I could, and always inform them of what was going on with the search process and ask for their input, within whatever legal limits that we had at that time.

And I think all of us on the committee had that sort of approach to the committee. I mean, none of us was looking forward to wasting a year or our time looking for, you know, Mr. or Mrs. Charming. [laughing]

If the search process that we went through would have been similar to the previous one, and would be such that we wouldn’t command any kind of respect or trust from our community.

So regardless of what our opinions were about this next President, or the future of the University, we agreed on that one thing, that the process had to have integrity.

I was even writing an official Presidential Search Committee journal [chuckles], which we were publishing on a Web site, and I was distributing through email. And I was always able and willing to meet with folks and to answer the questions, and then bring their concerns to the Search Committee.

So I was very, very, very proud of the process. And halfway through the process, I realized that I was very glad that I took on this opportunity. I obviously learned from it, but I also realized that the final decision didn’t matter. What needed to happen was this catharsis basically for this different constituency and the University to learn how to live, learn, teach together and whatnot. And that we were going to make the President that we needed; that we were going to make the President successful; that we were going to create the conditions where this new President – who is going to bring the University together now, who is going to be successful – so that was at least my view.

It was really about us and the control that we have over the University. Granted, as long as the President actually allowed for that, and was open to hear that.

And I think that’s still the case. I mean, again, I’m going to be honest, Dr. McIntyre was not my first choice. I was – ultimately, when we came down to a vote – and we tried to avoid voting till the very end; it was very consensus-based, very much like the students – when it came down to that final vote, I actually voted for somebody else. But I was confident with the people we had at the final stage of the search, because all along, we only advanced the people that we knew could do the job. And then it came down to a minute difference.

And I think I was wrong about the vote I cast at that time; but at that time, I voted for someone else and not the President. But I’m happy with the decision. Happy? [chuckles] I’m ecstatic with the decision we made, and I think it’s proving to be a good one.

I mean, it’s also proving that there’s a lot of work left, sort of independent of who’s the President but it’s also … there was a slight change that happened. And this is, again, what the students are about. I think I kind of addressed this a little bit earlier.

We wanted a leader, we wanted a President, we wanted a Provost, a Dean, who was going to represent the interests of the faculty, the interests of the students, the interest of what we see as the education, you know, the most optimum conditions and whatnot.
We didn’t want somebody who was going to be simply the messenger from the HEC Board or the State or the Trustees, or somebody who’s going to be the messenger from the future, who’s going to bring us news of what the reality is going to look like in the future.

If that was going to be the reality; if we couldn’t change that; if the Administration – er, the legislators were going to cut our resources, we wanted to know the President was going to stand with us and fight it till the very end – till they cut the resources, if they indeed did.

We didn’t want somebody who was going to basically soften the blow that may have come from the legislators. I mean, he wasn’t our President at the time, he was working for the forces of the future, or for the legislators, or the HEC Board at that time.

I think that has changed now. Now, we have a President who is our President. She’s going to sink or swim with us. And she’s going to go to Olympia and represent our interests – and not the other way around.

She’s not going to come here and say, “Well, you know, the legislators” – who should have no input in decisions regarding education – “well, the legislators seem to think that we need to have more Business Administration programs and less reading and writing programs,” or something like that, you know.

Does that make any sense? So I think that change has occurred but …

KB How long did the process take, from the appointment of the committee until the decision to bring President McIntyre here?

DP I think … a full year, I think. I mean, we started in June. We worked really hard during the summer months. That’s when we were crafting the mission statement that we would be using, or the job description, those types of things.

And yeah, I think … because I remember at the final interviews, it was nice outside, so probably a year later, maybe spring of the next year. So I felt like it was a long process, but it was worthwhile.

KB It sounds as though all the participants were heard on this committee, do you think?

DP Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, absolutely, yeah.

KB Who chaired the committee?

DP Roger Fouts. He was the faculty representative and he chaired the committee. Richard Allenbaugh [sp?] was another faculty rep. He was from the west side, a psychologist. Linda Beath was on it, and Morris Ubelbacker. And I worked really closely with Morris. Barbara Radke was a representative of the exempt staff.

KB Which Trustees were on it?

DP Leslie Jones, Judy Yew and Jay Rich. In a way, the only three Trustees that still remained from that old guard of Trustees. [chuckles] All of it has kind of come together nicely.

Christie Gillespie was the other student representative. She was there on behalf of the student government. And we did away with our recall petition. [laughing] And actually, worked really well with her as well.
I’m forgetting who the other folks were, but there are records obviously of that.

KB Do you have any last thoughts that you’d like to share? Anything that I forgot to ask, or that you forgot to offer?

DP I don’t know, I just … they did so much more. And I promise that I will give a lot of these — er, take a lot of these documents over to the Archive Building, and a lot of these documents sort of tell their own stories, so it will be possible to research it that way as well.

KB Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time and your thoughts.

DP Thank you, Karen. ’Bye.