1997

Helmi Habib interview

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Smith: This is September 30th, 1997. I am Milo Smith the cameraman is Dr. Eldon Jacobsen. And our interview today is with Dr. Helmi Habib who spent most of his years as a Chemistry Professor, and nearing the end of his career he was in charge of the advising program here at Central. Good afternoon, Helmi.

Habib: Good afternoon.

Smith: Would you please start with a brief personal history of your life?

Habib: OK. I was born in Cairo, Egypt, and I went to a British school in Cairo. And this is why my English is not too bad, compared to what it would have been had I gone to an Egyptian school, but the school I went to was 98% British students because they were the Sons and daughters of the occupation forces in the Suez Canal, at the time, the British occupation forces. So at any rate, I graduated from that high school and was admitted to medical school at Cairo University, and that was the year that all the terrible riots went on in Cairo, just before Naquib and Nasser took over. And the riots were against, of course, British occupation and all that. At any rate, the University was closed most of the year, so I didn’t get any where with that. I decided then that it was best for me to go somewhere else. So I came here to the United States in 1953, and went to Walla Walla College because my parents at that time were Seventh Day Adventists, they still are, well I shouldn’t say that they’re both dead now, but they were, the rest of their lives. And so I went to school at Walla Walla College, got a Bachelor of Science Degree in Chemistry. I decided I wouldn’t go to medical school. And then went to the University of Idaho, and I didn’t get much of an education at Walla Walla College. I must say that. I mean, my knowledge of chemistry was minimal. And so I decided I would go to the University of Idaho, which had a Master’s Program, only, and caught up, by the time I had the Master’s Degree there, I had caught up to where I should have been. And then I went to Washington State University, and got my Doctorate there in 1964. Well, in 1961 my wife and I met, well, we met before that at... she was a secretary in the Chemistry Department, one of the secretaries, and I was a graduate student at Washington State, and we met there, and we got married in 1961. And then after my doctorate in 64, I came to Central. And I’ve been here since.

Smith: Now, Helmi, were your parents College educated?

Habib: No. My father served in the British Army during the first World War. He was an Egyptian, but he had the uniform and everything else. I don’t know what his rank was, but I have pictures of him in uniform, some medals that he won in the British Arms’. My mother was Egyptian, but of French ancestry, I mean her mother and Father came from, originally, from France, and so at any rate, neither one of them had gone on to a University. And after, I don’t know exactly what my father did, hut eventually ended up being Undersecretary of the Interior in the Egyptian Government. And then when the Revolution took place then he was relieved and retired at that time.

Smith: Now, during the years that you taught in the Chemistry Department, would you just generally indicate those courses that you usually considered were yours?

Habib: Well, what were mine, were different, at different periods of time. When I was brought here, I was brought here to teach Physical Chemistry and Inorganic Chemistry. And those were the two courses that I taught. Much to the dismay of Bill Neschwander, who wanted to teach the Physical Chemistry, hut, at any rate, these are the courses that I taught. But later on we hired, see my degree was in Inorganic Chemistry, and Physical Chemistry as a minor, and so we hired a full Physical Chemist. Then I didn’t teach Physical Chemistry any more. I taught Inorganic Chemistry and General Chemistry, primarily. Freshman, General
Chemistry. And the Inorganic Chemistry is a junior level course, seven courses, and then some at the graduate level.

Smith: Now, this is purely an opinion question, Helmi, what was your general opinion of the students that you got in your freshmen chemistry classes? Were they prepared?

Habib: Generally, no. Even all the way through my thirty-some years of teaching here. There were roughly one-third of the students, reasonably well-prepared, but the others were not. And so we’d always have to start the course from scratch, as if they’d never had a course in mathematics or a course in chemistry before. And that delayed things, that delayed things, but then some of them were very well prepared and just breezed right through it.

Smith: Now, you arrived here in 64. When did you actively retire?


Smith: 95.

Habib: Yes.

Smith: Now, I recall that some few years back, you served in an extra capacity out of the Chemistry Department on behalf of the University. You were concerned with toxicity of chemicals that could become dangerous if they were not handled correctly, if they weren’t disposed of correctly. I can’t remember what your title was.

Habib: No, I wasn’t involved in that. That was Clint Duncan I think. My involvement was I was the campus radiation officer.

Smith: Radiation, OK.

Habib: I held the license for all the radioactive materials that were allowed on campus.

Smith: OK.

Habib: And I was responsible to the Government, to the Federal Government for quite a while, and then that shifted to the State. We had at one time, thirty-two grams of Plutonium on campus. And Plutonium is a highly toxic material. The thirty-two grams, you couldn’t make a bomb out of it. It just isn’t enough, but Plutonium in very, very small amounts would be fatal. And so I was very concerned about having that sample of Plutonium on campus, because in Lind Hall in case of a fire, all of that would be vaporized and everybody down the street would have a problem. So we eventually got tired of that. We, I think the University of Washington had the facilities to take care of it. Nobody was using the Plutonium anyway.

Smith: Now would something like that he kept under the kind of security that might require a safe?

Habib: It should be. It should have been.

Smith: And it wasn’t?

Habib: But it was not. As a matter of fact, what it was, was what we call a neutron source. Which is a Plutonium beryllium mixture, and the Plutonium, radio actively, interactive with the beryllium, and the net result of the production of neutrons. But most radio active materials don’t produce neutrons. It has to be by nuclear reaction (?). And then to shield the neutrons, the source, which is about, oh, this big around, and
about this high, was stuck in the middle of a big canister about two and a half feet in diameter and about three feet high, and it was stuck in the middle of it, and it was surrounded by paraffin wax. That was the best shielding for neutrons.

Smith: Is that right?

Habib: And then it had a (?)

Smith: What was the canister made of?

Habib: Metal. Just a thin sheet.

Smith: Not lead.

Habib: No. You didn’t need lead. The wax took care of all the neutrons. There was no problem there. Then you had a little port that you could open with a tube going through the wax, through the source, and then you got a beam of neutrons that you could use. But it set in the store room, in Lind Hall, and to keep people from sitting on it, you shouldn’t really, they had a little piece of cardboard with some nails sticking up through it so that nobody would sit on it. But no, we had no adequate security, so when Bernie Martin was Dean and I took over as Radiation officer. So I told him that this had to be rectified. We either had to build a storage building for it, outside of Lind Hall, which was absolutely fire proof and you know, nobody could break into it, or else we had to get rid of it. And after looking at the cost of that, he decided to get rid of it. And nobody was using it. There was very little radio active work. I’m the only one who did anything with radio active materials, and I stopped that twenty-five years ago or so.

Smith: I thought it was important to refer to the fact that you were the radiation officer and that we did have on campus at one time, materials that you were concerned with, because I think that this is kind of indicative of a period through which we have lived here on this campus. Now, what, did you have a minor program in your academic preparation?

Habib: Oh, yes. My minor for the Bachelor’s Degree, is that what you’re talking about?

Smith: Sure.

Habib: Was Religion.

Smith: It was.

Habib: Yes.

Smith: Did you have a choice down there?

Habib: Not much. You had to take thirty credits of religion courses anyway, and that made a minor, so I just tacked it on and called it a minor. But it didn’t take...

Smith: How about in your Master’s Program?

Habib: No, the Master’s, there was no minor. For the doctorate we had to have a major within the Department, two minor’s within the Department. And then one minor outside the Department. And my major was Inorganic Chemistry; my two minors were Physical Chemistry and Analytical Chemistry. And then my outside minor was mathematics.
Smith: Now, did you ever teach in any other Department here on Campus?

Habib: Yes. I taught for Safety Ed. I gave them a chemical hazards course at one time, and then I taught a full year, junior level modern physics class for the Physics Department. That was very interesting.

Smith: Did you enjoy the opportunity to get out, away from chemistry part of the time?

Habib: Yes. Because, for two reasons, first of all this was during the time I was in administration and I hadn’t taught advanced courses for quite a while, and so I became very rusty in terms of my mathematics and physics. And so when I taught the physics class, I had to go back and really work to bring it all back, and that was a lot of fun. I had a great time.

Smith: Now when you started here at Central what was your rank?

Habib: I was an Assistant Professor.

Smith: Assistant. And you became a Full Professor well before you retired?

Habib: Yeah, I became a Full Professor in 1976. I became an Associate Professor in ’66, two years after I came here, and then became a Full Professor in ’76.

Smith: Through all of those years, Helmi, did you ever see any appreciable improvement in the preparation of students coming to Central from other places. Coming to Central from right out of high school’? Did the student body ever show any better sign of becoming educated?

Habib: I can’t really say that I did. I think the level of preparation stayed relatively constant. The students, I shouldn’t say, this shouldn’t be taken as applied to all students, obviously, but very frankly, half of the students that I got as freshmen did not belong in college. They were poorly prepared and totally unfit. And there was nothing I could do, threats, quizzes, exams, offers of help, tutorial sessions, nothing I could do could bring that roughly fifty per cent of the class, who ended up with “D’s” and less every quarter in my general chemistry classes. And this has been fairly constant throughout my career.

Smith: Now, this must have been excellent preparation however, for your administrative assignment nearing the end of your career when you became responsible for the advising program at Central.

Habib: Oh, definitely. Definitely. I was very concerned that the students were getting into courses for which they had no background. And we tried to make sure that they got into, if they had to take courses for which they had no background, that they got the background first. That they got remedial help in mathematics, or remedial help in, well, we had some preparatory courses in chemistry, also, and in physics. Most of the sciences have courses like that. And they took that before they took the rigorous courses, and in some cases that helped them out.

Smith: Now while you were in charge of the advising office, what title did you have?

Habib: Director of Academic Advising. But in actual fact, I ended up being half-time as an Assistant to the Undergraduate Dean. Because I spent half a day in his office, and I would take care of, I took care of all requests for deviations from the graduation requirements. For example, a student may have had extensive military training, and asked to be relieved of a P.E. requirement. Well, you know, he had done P.E., he or she had done the P.E. Others had taken courses similar to ours, but don’t exactly correspond, and if they fulfilled the purpose for which the course was required, then we went ahead and approved it.

Smith: Did you reveal a hard-nose in your decision making?
Habib: The reason Don Schliesman put me in that position, he told me, “Because you’re an S.O.B.! And that’s what I need in there, an S.O.B.” So I didn’t...I rejected an awful lot of...Especially. I was especially hard-nosed about students who wanted to get away with less than the sixty credits of upper division work. I mean, sixty credits to me is far too little. It should be ninety. Half your work should be at the upper division level. And sixty credits, to me, I never allowed one.

Smith: Now while you were Director of Advising, can you think of any particular policies that you originated that were of your creation? Any major changes in the advising program?

Habib: Well, I always had the idea that advising should be done by the faculty, but towards the end, I deviated from that to a certain point in terms of using only certain faculty as advisors, because there’s no use sending twenty students to an advisor who’s not going to spend any time with them. And we tried various mechanisms to kind of induce the advisors to spend some time with the students, like signing the registration form before the student can register. The students had to see an advisor to get the signature. Well, some advisors signed a whole bunch of forms and put them outside their doors to be picked up. Yeah, that doesn’t do any good, and so the thing I’m most proud of, the critical time is the freshman year, and the thing I’m most proud of is, I started, I got some money from Ed Harrington and started a program where we brought as many of the new freshmen as would come, and that was ninety-some per cent of them, to campus on selective dates during the summer. And on those dates I had a cadre of seven to nine faculty in different areas available for advising. If students came here they were advised and registered right there, so that if they went to registration to register and the courses that the advisor had agreed to weren’t available, they went back to the advisor and modified the program and came back. And so they were reads’ to go, and then we had other things going for them about campus life, and studying, this kind of stuff But that was a very, very good program, extremely successful. Most of them brought their parents with them, and we had a separate program for the parents. We kept them entertained and learning about the University, and things like that, and the parents loved it. It was a very, very good program. After I left the whole thing died.

Smith: Now there was a part of an advising program that I’m sure you knew about, and I don’t know really how to do explain what I’m talking about other than to describe to you my response. I was assigned two or three, never more, two or three students who had been having trouble ...and they were in danger of flunking out...

Habib: Yes... Special Advisors... Right...

Smith: And I was told at the time that I could be a little God Almighty and demanding what they do...

Habib: Exactly.

Smith: One, I can still remember, he claimed that he could write pretty well, except that he didn’t want to. So he didn’t turn in papers. Well, I insisted that every time he got an assignment, I was to know about it, and that he was to write a paper and give it to me first. And then I’ll go through, and critically I will underline misspellings, and incorrect word usage, and I’ll expect you to go find a way to correct this paper before you turn it in to your Prof And I could be pretty hard-nosed, and I was never happier than when a young man became a leader on campus who had been one of my advisees in his fourth quarter on campus he had almost flunked out in his freshman year, and he came to me at graduation, up at the Pavillion, and shook my hand and told me that he probably would never have graduated from Central or any place else, if I hadn’t been hard-nosed with him. Did you create this system?

Habib: Yes. There were about ten Special Advisors like you, and students who had been on probation and got suspended, see students got a warning after one quarter if they didn’t make a two point average. The second quarter, if they don’t make a two point average again, they’re on probation, and the third quarter, then they get suspended. But they automatically were re-admitted. And I looked at the records and they just went another quarter and got suspended again, and that didn’t do anybody any good, and so we decided to be a little more hard-nosed and told them if you are re-admitted you have to agree to all the terms that a
Special Advisor would impose on you. And that was highly successful. The recidivism, I guess that’s the word, rate was very, very low while the program was operating. But then a Dean came along, and I won’t mention his name, but he flatly told the faculty that he didn’t give a damn whether they advised any students, or not. Or whether they were good teachers, or not. He told me bluntly that his priorities were, number one research, number two public service, number three teaching and the things that went with it. And so he told, I was there when he was talking to the faculty of CLAS. he told them that they could do advising if they want, but he won’t consider it as part of their records for matters of promotion, so, you know, I can’t blame the faculty for being reluctant to do this.

Smith: Now, Helmi, I happen to know, because I sat on the Senate, I happen to know that you were very much involved with the Faculty Senate...

Habib: I was Chair for a time...

Smith: … for some period of time.

Habib: Actually that was by default. I was not elected Chair of the Senate. I was elected by my Department to the Senate, and when they had the elections for Senate Chair and Vice-chair, and so on. Jimmy Applegate was being nominated for Senate Chair, and he asked me if I would be Vice-chair. And I said,” You know, Jimmy, this next year is going to be my first year on the Senate after a long absence.” He said, No problem. I-Ic said, “You don’t have to do anything as the Vice-chair. You know once in a while, you take over a meeting, but that’s about it.” I said, “Well, OK.” So then during the summer he got appointed Special assistant to the President. Well, the position... I had to move from Vice-chair to Chair, and it was an interesting year. I had a good time. I saw...this was at the time when there was a lot of turbulence on campus because of the Faculty Code. And this was at a time when the Senate confronted the administration on every issue and things like that. And I told the Senate very frankly that this was going to be the Senate that’s going to focus on cooperation as much as possible so that we can carry on the business of teaching our students. Our business is not to run the University, our business is to teach the students, and we have to be involved, of course, in other things, but that’s not our prime purpose. And they agreed with that, and I got along real well with Jim Brooks, although, what one or two years before that, I stood up in the Senate and called for a vote of confidence on Jim Brooks. Because I thought he was destroying, he and that Herb Frank and that particular Board of Trustees, destroyed collegiality. See, when I first came here in 1964, Jim Brooks was President, Wes Crum was Dean of Instruction, and the Senate was run by the Vice-chair of the Senate. The Chairman of the Senate was Jim Brooks, don’t you remember. The President was the Head of Faculty. And that’s the way it should be. I mean this is an academic institution, and the President should be the leader and head of faculty. Well, for a while it was so. Jim was very involved, but then the student revolts came on, and the taxpayer started wondering why are we supporting this and they were unhappy with faculty supporting the students, and this sort of thing, and so they started to say, “Control your faculty.” Well, the only way to control the faculty is if they impose their own rules. And that’s why the Board decided they were going to impose their own Code. Before that time, if you remember, the Code was generated and changed by bi-lateral agreement between the Board of Trustees and the faculty. But they changed that, and now, since that time there has been no collegial relationships between the administration and the faculty. And that’s a big loss.

Smith: Yes. I can well-remember in those years that I served that the word collegiality was used probably fifty, sixty times at every meeting, and there was a lot of debate as to, ’Whose code is this?”

Habib: Exactly.

Smith: Is this the Faculty Code, or is this the Board of Trustee’s code?

Habib: It was called a Faculty Code, but it was the Board of Trustee’s Code. Hell, when they testified to that I started carrying a lunch pail to work, because we were labor, and I was going to look the part.
Smith: Now, that we have hit on a few very serious topics, can you remember any humorous events that occurred on campus that lightened our lives for a while?

Habib: Do you mean our lives on campus?

Smith: Yes. Faculty, students, faculty organizations, student organizations. Things that were humorous.

Habib: I tell you, the most humorous things that I have been to were some of the plays that you put on, Milo. Some of the new Simon plays and things like that that you put on, those were marvelous, marvelous productions. But as far as something aside of the humor of the entire faculty, I can’t really think of anything, for the entire faculty. There were certain things that we had a lot of fun with in the early days. Ray Smith and others, we would all get together and start talking about, you know academic programs and academic things. Like, for example, when they started the position of Dean of Undergraduate Studies, he approached me. He said, ‘Why don’t we apply for that?’ And I said, what do you mean WE apply for that?” He said, Yeah, we can share the title. I’ll be Dean of, and you’ll be Undergraduate Studies.” We’ll just split the title between us. And there were a lot of … a lot of kidding around, a lot of conviviality, congeniality and stuff which you don’t find any more. Beyond a certain point, and this was about the time of the Code change and where they started talking about RIF, and the decrease of funds so that Merit was not available and promotions were hard to get, and so it became more competitive. All the faculty started working for themselves, and rather than as a cohesive unit and Department. Some of the Departments maintained that, hut mine didn’t. My Department split right down the middle, and created a lot of problems.

Smith: Now, this is the one that a lot of people hesitate to commit themselves, but I hope you will. Which administrators and faculty come to mind as important leaders during your teaching career here?

Habib: Well, you know, Jim Brooks, I think, was a very important leader. When you think about it he took over a school that was a College of Education, and the prime function was teacher preparation, and to turn that around to where it became a multi-purpose State College, and then University without an extreme amount of bloodshed, because, you know, the people in Education of course, they were top dog, and they did not want to relinquish that, and that was a difficult task. And I credit him with turning it around into a multi-purpose institution, and he did it very skillfully. He did a very good job on that. Other administrators, I think that did a really fine job, Charlie McCann. I really liked Charlie because he was Head of, Dean of Faculty, and his idea, ideas about general education, and what we should expect of students, and so on, were excellent. I really liked that. And you knew where you stood with him. At any rate, he was an administrator that I admired. Don Warner was an administrator I admired a great deal because, again, he was, he knew what education was about, what higher education was about. You know, let me just point out, that in the last five or six years, and as recently as this last, “Campus Moon Before June” that we get in the mail now. Where the Board of Trustees have asked the Campus to answer certain questions. What is our role, what is our niche, Why do we do this? Have you seen or heard one time where the word “Academic Standards” or “Academic Quality” have been mentioned? Not once. Not once. We talk about diversity, we talk about everything else, about increasing students, about putting them out faster, about this and that, but quality and academic standards are not of prime importance to administration.

Smith: I personally am pleased that you picked up Jim Brooks as worthy of special mention because it’s been my interesting opportunity to be on the campus quite a bit of the last five or six, seven years, and having coffee with current faculty is a thing in my home and in other homes with current faculty, and I have never seen anything change quite so much as the opinion of Jim Brooks. He keeps getting better every day.

Habib: Oh, yes. A lot of people are calling him St. James.

Smith: People are looking back and saying, we didn’t appreciate what we had when he was there.
Habib: Well, you know, when I called for the vote of confidence in Jim Brooks, I fully expected him to win it. I didn’t think he would lose a vote of confidence. But there were two things that bothered me, one was I wanted him to know how the faculty felt about what he was doing with the Board. He was no longer the representative of the faculty to the Board. He was a secretary of the Board imposing their views of education, I guess, on the faculty. At any rate, I wanted to jolt him into that, but secondly there were a lot of people at that time who wanted to do this, who didn’t dare, and they were people who were Full Professors who had tenure, but they didn’t dare stand up and call for a vote of confidence. You know, when I was at a faculty meeting and they were pounding on the table, wanting a vote of confidence, and then it came to who was going to propose it, and nobody would do it. Well, I said, “Hell, I’ll do it.” I was an Associate Professor, but I don’t like...I think as a faculty member I should be able to say what I think. That’s what academic freedom is all about. If it’s not true, then I don’t care if I’m Full Professor or not. And so I went to the Senate. Do you know how many of those people were there? Zero! No, I’m sorry, one person was there. Bill Newschwander, but none of the others who were calling for this, and when I made the proposal, I called for a vote, and if the vote should go in Dr. Brooks’ favor, that the faculty should then quit this haggling, and go back to doing what it’s supposed to be doing. If the vote was against Dr., Brooks, I hope he will come to the faculty and talk to us and see what can be repaired, and I had trouble getting a second. But I finally did get a second, and of course, it was turned down. And he set up a committee to study what the problem was, and the committee two years later, came up with the idea of having a vote of confidence...in Jim Brooks. But, at any rate, he, I think he did a marvelous job while he was President. And then when I became Senate Chair, and worked with him and saw his side of things, I garnered a lot of respect for him. I still have a great deal of respect for him.

Smith: Now, Helmi, do you recall any particular and significant differences between the administration and students, or the faculty and students that became issues while you were teaching? Other than the Viet Nam War.

Habib: Yeah, between faculty and students there was one time when the students called for a strike, and most of the faculty didn’t go along. And that created some friction there. This was the Kent State affair. And it was...let me just put in a side line here. Two of the faculty members that I really highly respect, there are many others, you understand, you, for example. But Ray Smith and Zoltan Kramar from the History Department. Two people who are fantastic minds, and marvelous teachers. And at that time they were teaching course in military strategy in the Second World War. A highly interesting course because they, you know, went through maps and showed them where Patton was breaking through and where the Germans were and all this kind of stuff, and on the day that the strike was to be called, you know, the students had placards and stood outside the doors to the buildings. But when it came time for class, the students who were in that class came with their placards and attended the class. Which showed how much they thought of...they didn’t want to miss a single lecture, even from the (?). So, but, that’s the only friction that I saw between faculty and students. There was a little bit when the Black Students’ Union confronted the administration and all the Department Chairs at one time. And it was at that meeting, we were at a meeting in Jim Brooks’, at the President’s House, and the Black Student Union was, had made a list of demands and Jim had all the Department Chairs there, and Gene Kosey got up and he said,” You know, you people are a minority, but”, he said, “I’m the only Polish-American on campus, and I’m not asking for any special favors.” I said, Hold it! I’m the only real Afro-American on this campus. Let’s face it. At least I’ve been to the continent, you know.” But any way, that actually broke the ice, and got them all laughing, and then we started getting down to business about how we should bring in more black students. And things went well.

Smith: That was probably about the same time as I had gone down to the Tri-Cities with Bruce Robinson to help him with a class he was teaching down there, and coming home we tuned in the radio, and there had been sit-ins in the President’s office, and the announcers who were reading the copy were embellishing the copy considerably and we almost expected to come up from Vantage to discover the campus was on fire, and it wouldn’t be a safe place to go the next morning.

Habib: Exactly.
Smith: And the news was ten times worse than the reality.

Habib: Oh, at least ten times.

Smith: We came up here the next morning and we found that there was a small minority of the black students who cared enough to even take any action at all.

Habib: Exactly. Exactly.

Smith: Now, Helmi, let’s move down to that list of short subjects about which you should have some opinions, and we’ll start with the salary schedule.

Habib: OK. We’ve had several salary schedules over the thirty years that I was there. I remember we used to have automatic steps, and like fools we threw that out, because the public schools, teachers, they got automatic steps for experience, and this cut it out for us. And then we went to purely merit, and then everybody was stuck. And so we’ve had all sorts of different salary schedules, none of them really equitable, and I’ve never thought that faculty were paid on any kind of schedule that gave us the kind of remuneration that they should receive. There were some people who really liked the merit system, where you stayed on the same salary unless you publish a paper or two, or something like that, which is ludicrous, I think. They gained by it, but nobody else, I mean you cant ask someone to stay at the same salary for five years, because of inflation. I mean, you’re getting a decrease in salary every year. And so people get demoralized with that, and when they find their standard of living decreasing, and they figure, well, if I’m being paid less, I’ll work less, and after a while the demoralization on this campus got so bad that you hardly found anybody on campus after three o’clock, or two o’clock in the afternoon. And that’s pitiful, I think.

Smith: Sure. Now, a short while ago you talked about the Faculty Code. What is your opinion, having seen it from inside and outside, and as the Senate Chair, as an administrator, as a teacher, what’s your feeling about the Faculty Code?

Habib: Well, I think it has... at first... Let me back track. The Faculty Code that existed when I came here which could be modified only by bi-lateral agreement that was, I thought, a very good code. And then when the Board imposed their code... what really bothered me, I remember sitting in a meeting of the Senate, and the Board of Trustees filed in to hear our reaction to their code, and Herb Frank stood there, right there, and he said. “We are going to have this code. Now what do you think about it?” Well, what difference does it make what we think about it? But that was... that was their attitude. So during the hearing then people pointed out, “Look, you’re treating someone with mental illness like a criminal in here. Should you modify this to take into account that this is an illness, just like any other illness, and be given sick leave and treating it all (?). No way. they would not consider any change whatsoever in that, and that was a very rigid, very managerial type code. But since that time, there have been changes in the code that have made it more humane. And I think it’s OK. I think as a document, right now, if they hang on to it, it’s OK, but the problem is there is a statement in there, there always is now, that at any time they can change it unilaterally, without prior notice. Well, what does a code do then? So, to me, it’s a worthless document. It’s used only to justify certain actions that the administration wants to take.

Smith: Now, Helmi, this next answer probably would he very, very valuable because you have worn so many different hats, but your opinion of academic freedom on Central’s campus.

Habib: In terms of whether it’s alive and well?

Smith: The kind of protection you had as a teacher in the classroom, for example.
Habib: Oh, I think I had pretty good protection on that. I never felt that I’d better not say something because I might be challenged on it, but one has to realize that with academic freedom there is academic responsibility. And so I did not talk about politics in my chemistry class. I don’t consider that part of academic freedom. But in terms of how I taught my class, how I graded my class, all these kinds of things, I had no problem whatsoever. In terms of standing up and criticizing the administration. I had no problems whatsoever. I stood up and called for a vote of confidence of the President, and that was in 1974, I think it was. In 1976 he promoted me to Full Professor. I was not penalized for having an opinion, and so I think, at least in my days here, from my point of view, that academic freedom was alive and well.

Smith: I need to ask you something that was...

Habib: Let me, on that, if I can back track a...

Habib: there was a Dean one time. I had... when I was an academic advisor, I was still a member of the Department of chemistry. I never gave up my rank and tenure. And the Department took some action with which I disagreed, and so I called the Chair, who was Don Dietrich, and I told him, “Don, I would like a meeting with the Department to discuss this. I don’t agree with, I want them to hear my views about that.” Well, he called up the Dean, and because the action they were taking was at the instigation of the Dean, so the Dean called me, and you know who I’m talking about, but I’m not going to mention the name, and he said if you want to talk to anybody about this, you talk to me and no one else. And I told him, “Sir, I will talk to anybody I God damn well please, and you have no right to tell me I can’t” And he said, “No, no, that’s not what I meant. That’s not what I meant.” I said, “Yeah, you bet.” Well, he tried, but again, I was able to tell him to back off And he backed off.

Smith: Sure.

Habib: So I think academic freedom at least up to that point, was alive

Smith: I can only judge on the basis of stories told to me by academics of my acquaintance, across the country, and when I compare what they tell me with what I enjoyed on this campus, we had quite considerable academic freedom at Central.

Habib: I agree. I agree.

Smith: How about town and gown relationships, Helmi?

Habib: I think they were pretty good. I was involved, see I was Senate Chair at the time that the whole business of the Central Investment Club got started. And I remember meeting in the President’s House with Jim Brooks and people from downtown, Joe Kelleher, and Case, among others, and had a very productive meeting, and then the effort that the town did to get the scholarships and so on for the students was magnificent. I don’t know that it is now, but there has been some friction because of the Taco Bell, and all this other stuff and the way the President has handled the Chamber of Commerce. But for the most part, the view down town of the campus, I have a lot of friends who are not campus people...The view there is very positive of the University and of the students.

Smith: Well, I can only make comparisons between what it was when I retired in 1990 and what it was when I came here in 1956. In 56 most of the town’s people knew very little about what went on this campus. They didn’t come to ball games. They didn’t come to plays. They didn’t come to music concerts...

Habib: That’s not true anymore.

Smith: ...they, as long as we did our job quietly, they didn’t bother us. It took an awful lot of effort to get the town to become aware that we are an institution of higher education. How about building naming policies, Helmi?
Habib: What are they”? You know, it used to be, well, like Hertz Hall was named after a prominent faculty member who, pretty much laid the foundation for the Music Program, for the marvelous Music Program, we have here on campus.

Smith: Yes.

Habib: You and, I hate to mention it, but Richard Leimaweaver, you know, laid the foundation for this marvelous Drama Department that we have, and so buildings should be named after people like that. Dorothy Dean was a marvelous teacher in chemistry, and Dean Hall was named after her. Now, I understand, when Garrity was President, he changed that policy to where buildings would be named after donors who would donate large amounts of money to the University. And I think that’s a rotten change.

Smith: And the current President says,” Buildings will be named for people who are deceased. We do not name buildings for living people.” How about the academic organization which you saw change several times?

Habib: Can I go back to the previous question?

Smith: Go ahead.

Habib: Naming buildings.. After they’ve deceased. He should have been here to see Dorothy Dean’s face when the building was dedicated in her name. He wouldn’t say something stupid like that.

Smith: Yeah,, we could use her, and we could use Randall. and we list Vie Bouillon, and on and on and on. We had a history of naming buildings for people who made contributions to the school, regardless, living or dead. OK, now, the academic organization which you saw change many times.

Habib: I kind of liked the organization we had before the Institution of a College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences. We had a School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, we had a School of Natural Science and Mathematics. We had a School of Arts, is that right? And one of Communication, I believe, I’m not sure.

Smith: Literature.

Habib: Literature. And I think that was a good organization. Then we tried to act big. We tried to act big. We wanted Colleges. We didn’t just want Schools. And I think that that created some problems. I mean, when Burt Williams became the first Dean of CLAS, he knew nothing about the Science of Mathematics. He couldn’t understand computers. He couldn’t understand computer science, and they were dying on the vine because of that. It just doesn’t work. The organization now is back to the way it was when we had the Schools pretty much. And I think it’s working.

Smith: Do you have any opinions that you will share with us concerning hiring policies and practices?

Habib: Absolutely. The prime word right now is diversity. Unfortunately, sometimes it is diversity at all costs, and I think that is wrong. I think in an academic institution the number one priority has to be quality. Number one, and then we look at other things. Now, I agree with diversity. When I was in my Department we were, the entire Department was male, and they were told when they hired new staff, they’re going to have to hire females. It was just flat out told. You’re going to have to hire females. Luckily, we had some
excellent candidates who were females, and those were the ones that were hired. But if they were not good, they would have had to hire them anyway, and that, I think, is wrong. Absolutely wrong.

Smith: Now, are there any programs, or activities on this campus that you think should not be part of a University?

Habib: You know I read that...

Smith: I’ll tip my hand just a little hit.

Habib: OK.

Smith: We have had a Dean who felt that all technical courses, regardless of what Department they were in, if they were technical they should be taught in a school of techniques and various kinds of practical sciences, but everything in T.I.E., up here, would have to be in a special school, not part of a University.

Habib: Well, I would agree with him, I think I know who the Dean was. I would agree with him, if the degree that was being offered was a Bachelor of Technology. But the fact that these students have to go through the entire general education program, makes it quite different. It isn’t just a technician you’re putting out. You’re putting out an educated person who can also do certain things.

Smith: Yes.

Habib: There are some programs that I feel are marginal, for example, I’ve always felt we shouldn’t have a program for Early Child Education. Elementary Ed. Fine, but to take a program and focus it on teaching kindergarten and pre-school, I think can be a small component of an Elementary Education Program. And so to have a... At one time we had whole, just about a Department of Early Childhood Education (?). Something like that, I think, doesn’t belong here. Another thing is all of the remedial work, the remedial English, the remedial math, all of... are we out of tape? Oh, OK- All of that really should not be on the University. We should tell these students if you need remediation in this, go to your Community College. Get your remediation, and then come to the University. We shouldn’t be doing it, spending our resources on that.

Smith: We want to thank you very much, Dr. Habib. You have given us information that’s going to be very, very valuable to somebody, sometime in the future. Thank you very much.

Habib: Thank you. A lot of fun.