An Interview with Dr. Richard Olenick and the Insights it Provided to the Understanding of American Education

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KM: So I did have to pick, just for the assignment, between focusing on your experience as a student and your experience as a professor, and I was advised to go with your experience as a professor. But, personally, I have an interest in both, so I’m going to ask a little bit about both, but the latter part might be the only part that I’m able to put in my paper. So my first question is: What is your educational background? In terms of what institutions you went to and when you went there.

RO: I went to Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago for my undergraduate degree – do you want to go all the way farther back or just college?

KM: Um… I’d like to know.

RO: I went to St. Joseph and St. Anne Grammar School in Chicago which was run by nuns at that time, and then I went to St. Rita high school in Chicago, which is run by Augustinian priests. I did spend my freshman year though in an Augustinian seminary, but I got kicked out, so I’m not going to talk about that… because I was unruly… and then I went to Illinois Institute of Technology. I entered there in 1969, graduated in ‘73. Actually I graduated in ’72, but I graduated a semester early but I stayed around because I was going to go to graduate school and I didn’t want to stay there for graduate school, they wanted me to but I didn’t, and I didn’t get my degree in December but I had everything satisfied so I just took a lot of extra courses the last semester. Then I went to Purdue, and I got my masters and PhD there. Finishing in ’79.

KM: That’s pretty fast… or is it? That just seems fast to me.

RO: ’73- ’79, that’s six years.

KM: Is that the normal track?
RO: Yeah, about 6 years.

KM: What would you say is the difference between your personal college experience and the one you perceive students to have here?

RO: Well, I would say there were a lot of apathetic professors in the sense of they just taught material and went through it and didn’t really care if students understood well. In particular I can think of an advanced math course I had that he just did ‘proof there, proof there,’ so I never did any homework problems or applications of it or anything like that. Unfortunately, a friend of mine took the course by someone else who did what I would have loved, seeing the applications...because it was supposed to be an applied math course. So I saw that in several courses, that I didn’t think the professors were as involved in teaching. And of course this was a research institute; in graduate school you’re kind of expecting that but as an undergraduate I still felt...now, that does not mean there were not some who were stellar...and I...do you want me to talk about them?

KM: Sure, yeah.

RO: There were...one that really convinced me to be a physics major because I started out as a math major...and I like applied math and not abstract math...and so I had him for the second semester physics. He was Chinese. He just was very caring and I’d go in and talk to him a lot about physics and that and he’d tell me more and show me what he’s doing so I really got interested; I appreciated the time he spent with me. And then I switched majors after another semester and I so had to take a course to catch up, which was optics, so he gave me a reading course in it so I was able to do that, I was very grateful to him...so grateful that I studied Chinese when I was in graduate school and I wrote him a letter in Chinese.
KM: That’s awesome!

RO: Which he appreciated...I guess it wasn’t too bad, it was a short letter. It was kind of fun. But then I had another professor…that guy was named Chumin Fu, was his name, but then I had another professor, Thomas Erber, who was Austrian by birth, and gave meticulous lectures, I mean, I wish I could do what he does, he would write on the board and just so nice and I just get excited when I write on the board, I just try to get hurry and get everything down, but he was always very nice and very ordered and very good, and then I did undergraduate research with him and published a paper with him and got a lot of stuff like that and…He actually, when I came here, I invited him down here to give a seminar once, so he did that. And then he retired a few years ago and the department was going to publish a book in his honor, because they have a German thing called festschriften where they publish a book on somebody’s honor when they retire and so I was asked to write one of the chapters in the book. And there are usually papers and so I had always wanted to do a paper on some other stuff that I had discovered working with him, so I wrote up that paper finally after 30 some years and that was the chapter in the book. And then I got to write a little about him. And I actually was just looking at that yesterday because…[gets out book, which is titled Doing Physics: a Festschrift for Thomas Erber]…This is the book…let me turn to my chapter…it’s called “Two and Three Dimension History; Simple Magnetic Cooperative Systems,” but, the end, which was the little tribute to him that I wrote, and I said, “This small paper presents unpublished findings of undergraduate research some 37 years ago that’s experience sold me on physics and Tom Erber’s mentoring made me want to be as good a teacher as he was and aspire to walk in his footsteps. Tom seems to have understood the potential within an individual and prompted it to become real. An influential poet of the late 20th century, William Stanley Merwin, expressed this notation in a poem titled The Unwritten:
'Inside this pencil crouch words that have never been written, never been spoken, never been taught; they’re hiding.’ Tom prodded those ideas crouching within us to come from shadow to reality as we began professional careers.” So, I was quite influenced by him. And then in graduate school, there were some professors that I thought were excellent, and also motivating as well. And then I made a stupid mistake which was my major professor I chose…I’ll just tell you, the first day he walked into our first class as a graduate student, he was Japanese, he said that one half to two thirds were going to get a C or worse in the course. And a C in graduate school is an F. And he held to that and so out of thirty students, there were basically…the next semester there were like 12…so he was quite mean. And why I ever went to him I do not know, but…I guess I did because you can have two types of major professors. One is where you’re working very close with everything that they’re doing and you get lots of publications that way and stuff, but the other is you kinda go off and do your own thing, and they kinda supervise, and I kinda wanted to do my own thing. So I was grateful for that. And it was…turned out well in the end. There were some rocky times.

KM: I’m sure. And then, so you said that in grad school that professors did tend to be more apathetic just because that was the nature of grad school.

RO: Yeah, because they’re there for research. But there were some …he actually the second semester course was really good. I guess he got rid of a lot of people and then he was a little nicer and very interesting, but there were a lot of ones who just threw math at you, but I would say there were oh, three or four that I thought were really exceptional and cared about you and cared about teaching…. I think that has changed a lot now. I think everywhere there’s better guidance counseling and mentorship in graduate school than back then.
KM: And then would you say that there’s also been an increase in more involved professors also at the undergraduate level?

RO: Oh yes, definitely. And then what’s going on in science is different from in humanities and having undergrads involved in research is a very big thing now, and that is a focus that always was there but now it’s like...if you’re at a strictly undergrad department that you have to be doing that.

KM: What were the administrators of the...well actually...I think I’m gonna move on to places where you have worked post grad school. So could I get the names of those places and years?

RO: University of Dallas...University of Dallas... uh I did go off to Caltech. So I came here in ’79, right from graduate school, and then I was at Caltech from...it wasn’t solid but ’82- ’84, I was at Caltech. And then I was back here. And then I was also at Moscow State University in 1992, spring semester, on a Fulbright Grant.

KM: What would you say that the administrators have been like? How have administrators maybe changed over that time that you’ve been here?

RO: Change? At UD?

KM: You make an excellent point. Have their responsibilities changed, or how visible they are in the community?

RO: You know they always had to be involved in fundraising. I would say that they’re more involved in fundraising and less in giving leadership and guidance in academics. I think that’s been the big shift. Because, we didn’t have a provost before, we had only the Constantine dean and the dean of the graduate school of management and then we suddenly got a provost and now
we have all these deans and the administration has proliferated since I first came here...in
numbers, therefore duties get spread out much more than they used to be

K: So, the amount of administration has grown over the years, and been more…

R: Yes, grown significantly. Especially in contrast to the size of the faculty.

K: And then…have you…would you say that there’s been any change in maybe the
instructional strategies or demeanor of the professors over the years while you’ve been here?
Have there been any shifts there?

R: Well, yes. I think in science, I can definitely see some, where we try to get students more
involved. Of course, lots of people use technology now, so you know we have PowerPoints,
although I know some professors don’t like PowerPoints. But in things like astronomy where
you have to show lots of images, it’s indispensable to have that. Before we used to use slides,
you know, so that’s…I would say that’s changed and also I don’t know about others but I try
flipping some courses and trying to flip upper level courses. In different ways I experiment. I am
not yet recording lectures but I am trying to get them to read more and then we do a lot of
conceptual questions at the beginning of class that if they haven’t read they’re not gonna know
anything.

K: So when you say you’re trying to flip the course, you mean…

R: Trying to go away from lecture, to having them…so…in the upper level courses we still
need to lecture, but it’s to get them to read more. In fact, that’s all I’m trying to get them to do.
Even in the non-upper level, to have them read and to discuss things.
What historical, social, political, economic influences have you seen on educational experiences?

Hm…social, political…economic, did you say?

Mhm, and historical.

…in education…I can tell you something I’ve been frustrated with.

Okay.

When I was in grade school I had to learn the ‘new math,’ which I hated. It was learning how to do numbers in different bases, which I never saw why, and didn’t really understand it, and then they found out that that was an experiment that didn’t work. But we keep trying to improve math education and it’s not gotten better. I think students are not any better now when they got into college than they were 30, 40 years ago. And I was involved a lot with working with physics teachers in high schools, to develop curricula, and materials, and I think they’re good teachers, and we try all these different things…I don’t know that we’ve necessarily succeeded. Now physics is a hard topic because most students have an aversion to it, so you have to bring them in, and really…try to get them to understand these concepts. I think we succeeded at bringing them in more, but having them combine math with things is still somewhat lagging. So I’ve been frustrated, I keep saying why…why can’t we just bottle something and put it in the water supply or something, so…but that’s life. You have to struggle with things. So it still is an ongoing struggle, and I see people come up with different ideas and some things…you know I try a lot, but I think you have to tailor the education you’re giving to your audience. I don’t know if they still have the banner in the media lab, in education, ‘know your dogs.’ You have to know your students and then you work with them. So I think that’s fundamentally, that’s what we have
to do. And something that would work at UD wouldn’t work at a state university, I know for sure. And things at state universities won’t work at UD.

KM: Do you have any recollection of important educational experiences?

RO: Oh yes. Well, the first would be in 6th grade Sister Joseph Marie would answer all my questions about science. And then she was very patient and very appreciative. Another one I had was that I really recommend, it’s a little harder for kids to do now, when I was in 5th grade, a salesman came around selling the world book encyclopedia, and I begged my parents to get it, and I did and I spent the entire summer on the summer steps going a through z and I learned so much that I still remember. I learned like, all these different types of birds and animals, dogs, places, all that stuff. And I thought that was such a great experience. And now you can just do it on your phone or on a computer, but the encyclopedia is a little bit more guided, but I thought that was significant because it really just opened up the world for me.

KM: Would you say that even though there is technically more access to information, would you say that has translated to people accessing it more, or what cause/effect…

RO: Well I think people can access it but there’s no understanding that necessarily comes with it; it’s facts. And you know there was this poet in the early 20th century, I’m trying to think of her…just keep thinking of Milnie…ugh I’ll think of her, in a second. She basically said that…and she was very ahead of her time…she says we have all these facts and we’re bombarded by facts, but we have no loom to weave and understand it. And that’s what teachers are for. You weave together the understanding of the facts, how do things fit together, what do they tell us about the world or ourselves or whatever we’re studying, so they’re your guides but they’re helping you weave, be your own weaver of that understanding. So yeah I think there’s a
lot more facts to be accessed, but that doesn’t mean…another famous quote by…I think it was…*inaudible*, “a house is built of stones but a collection of stones doesn’t make a house,” and a collection of facts doesn’t make a science. So…how do you get to that connection is the hard part.

KM: Have there been evolutions of educational issues and concerns during your career that you’ve noticed?

RO: Hm…well one of my concerns, not necessarily national, but I think it’s several people’s here. I think most universities are extremely liberal. I mean I think there’s like, if you are not very, very liberal you’re very looked down upon, and that bothers me. And I’ve witnessed it firsthand by going to other universities and I’ve seen it. So I’m very grateful for our university because it’s much more balanced here than at other places. Another trend has been the cost of education. I’m very upset with publishers because I think they charge ridiculous amounts for books, and they’re not doing all that much anymore, and they’re just charging because they feel they can charge it, it’s like a monopoly and I wish the government would actually look into it, because I think it is a monopoly, or there’s racketeering going on, with setting prices. Well, I know not here, but in state schools there’s a proliferations of majors to where every little thing becomes a major and I’m just like…why…don’t we have more cohesiveness, a more general understanding of things fundamental for life, and also getting jobs, I mean I think there’s a big importance of getting jobs now, and through our accreditation we have to track, there’s an emphasis on people getting jobs or going to graduate school right after, so I mean, that’s good, but there’s some majors, not necessarily here, but at other places, where I don’t see how they ever get a job.

KM: Just because their major is too specific? It’s not broad enough to apply to enough things?
RO: Right, right. And that’s a good point because I think the undergraduate education should be very broad, you know, still within a major, but it should have a broad basis. When I was at Caltech I got to know some students as undergraduates and I was appalled. They had no philosophy…well they offered it, but they didn’t have to take it. They knew no philosophy, yeah they had some…it wasn’t really literature but they had some course in English, but they got into their major and they would take tons of courses in their major and I just…because all my friends out there, they say, “Don’t you want to teach at Caltech?” And I say never, never. I mean, they’re trying to do a graduate education at the undergraduate level. Not just in level of what they’re talking about but in that you’re just focused on one thing now. And I don’t believe that’s what an undergraduate education should be.

KM: Was there anything else on that? I mean there doesn’t have to be, I’m just…

RO: Um…no, I guess nothing.

KM: How has student academic performance and behavior evolved during your career?

RO: Hm…students were very rowdy at first.

KM: So students are well behaved now?

RO: Sort of…it varies from class to class, year to year. I can’t say they’re more well behaved now because they still text and do things in class and so…I would put that under not being not well behaved. Whereas before they would just be kinda rowdy, which I would…I like the rowdiness, because I can channel that. If they’re texting it’s hard to channel that, except by saying don’t text. The other thing…um…we really change from year to year. I mean every class has its own character. I would say that over all though, I have not seen the student body change. I think they are very, very good men and women that we get here. And I think they’re serious
about education. So I would say that has always remained the same, so we’re very
fortunate…and of course that’s why all the faculty stay here, it’s because of the students. It’s not
because of the administration or the pay or anything like that, it’s because we like the type of
students we work with. Because it’s invigorating.

KM: So would you say that’s typically pretty unique to UD?

RO: I think it is…I’ve never taught somewhere else long term. I have asked the provost and said
that there are some programs…I would love to go teach at Carleton college for a year, and see
what they do different, and come back and report on it, or integrate, or tell them things that
maybe we do that’s maybe a little better than what they do. Carelton is a small liberal arts
college that does very well with their students. I wish we had more of those kinds of exchanges
with universities. He said there are some, I think I’m gonna push him on it.

KM: Would you have had any way of noticing maybe how student academic performance and
behavior has changed in other institutions just in how you perceive it? I know you wouldn’t have
first-hand experience, but maybe through colleagues or…

RO: Yeah, through colleagues. I would say the number one complaint from colleges and other
institutions is that students can’t do any mathematics. That they really can’t, that’s the number
one complaint. And that has always been there, I mean, but, you know, here, yes we have some,
but it’s not everybody. There I think it’s just a bigger problem than it is for us. So, I know that.

Okay, I will tell you another thing that I’m concerned…which would mean UD needs to step up,
is that two years in a row I’ve reviewed graduate research fellowship applications for the
National Science Foundation, it’s a very prestigious award that one can get, and they get like,
three years of being paid about $40-50,000 a year. So they can just do research, they don’t have
to teach or do anything as a graduate student. I’ve been surprised because this is the third time
I’ve done it. The first time I did it, there were several undergraduates who were authors on
papers, so that’s good. I did that as an undergraduate. We try to do that here too, it’s a little hard.
We try to…now there were ones who were first authors, which meant they came up with
everything and they wrote the whole paper. And their professor is second author. Now that’s
very impressive; we don’t have that. And I haven’t seen many students that I thought would take
the initiative to do that. So that’s…I’m still kinda…thinking, reflecting on that. On how…well
A), do we really need that, or B), can we ever do that. What would it take in a student…and I’m
kinda getting to the point where I know what it would take…I don’t think we can do it because
of the large core, our science majors are taking other things. So I think the sacrifice is they have
a broader education. So I’m okay with it. And luckily, at least in discussions, being first author
didn’t seem to impress a lot of people. I do not know all overall, for everybody on the panel…it
seems it was noted but it wasn’t like “wow, everybody has to have this now” or something. So
that’s one thing that I think has changed. And I’ll tell you one of the things is students that can
do this, they need to do research programs, like after their freshman year, after their sophomore,
after their junior year. We usually have them do it between junior/senior year, for their thesis.
And there’s programs all over the United States that support them, and that’s good, but now we
have to push people after their freshman year, after their sophomore year, which is really hard to
get into that so…it’s kind of a struggle there. But that’s what we need to probably do more.
KM: In terms of the math problem, would you say that the amount of complaints has been about
the same, or that it’s become a more prevalent problem?
RO: I would say it’s about the same, but that it’s always there. Yeah, about the same. And so I
think they were expecting it to be less as time would go on but it hasn’t changed.
KM: How has parent involvement changed?

RO: At the undergraduate level?

KM: Yeah.

RO: Um…Well…they’re a little bit more involved. You know they’re not supposed to contact us. Because they’re adults, so we don’t necessarily get contacted all that much. But that’s not to say we don’t know the parents, I mean we do know the parents, so…I’d say it’s a little bit more. I get to know more parents before students graduate than just at graduation. So I would say it would be greater. And I think that it’s…I’m happy and I think they should be because it’s pretty expensive to go here. I would wanna make sure I know what’s going on with my child. So yes, I think it’s good.

KM: Do you think that parental involvement has changed at lower levels of education?

RO: Yes…

KM: In terms of being more or less involved?

RO: Um…I think there’s sort of…there’s a dichotomy if you look at it. I have a friend that retired recently and she taught special ed, as many years as I was here, and she had a lot of parental involvement with special ed, which needs to be, but on the other hand, I’ve given like *inaudible* school I went to last year, and I arranged for a parent family night, and then we brought telescopes. They were just ecstatic because they’d never had the turnout at those like they had that night. So there’s this other end of like, a lot of times, if its voluntary, there’s not such a concern, unless it’s something that just gets their curiosity, which I guess is what I did, so I was…I felt bad for them because I would hope every time that they…and they have like 300
parents and kids there, you know just so happy, and I would kinda hope other times would be that large and so…I have a feeling that there’s…and I think the dichotomy has to go along wealth lines, too. I think that the other people are working and it’s really hard to get them to come in and talk to the teachers, and I think also first generation students, like their parents are a little afraid to talk to teachers, you know, which is kinda good, because I hope they’re kinda putting teachers on a pedestal; I wish we all were still on a pedestal. That by the way I think has really changed, and I really, really, really, wish that had not changed. Not because I’m in education, but because I think teachers, as a profession, is not as respected as it should be, and in particular, grade school and high school teachers. And, while I’m on the topic, I will say that…you asked me about the administration earlier, I think most universities treat professors as employees now, that’s all they are. We’re employees, we’re not special. And I became a professor because I thought I was special, in the sense that I’m gonna be inspiring students, I’m gonna be working with them. They’re not just…a client. It’s a different relationship now.

KM: So it’s become more impersonal?

RO: Yeah, I think in a…definitely the way we’re treated by the administration, definitely. We’re out of the loop. And I guess the other big change in administration is that administration is a separate organization at the university. And the co-leadership is not so much there anymore. It used to be faculty were kinda co-leaders with the administration, co-governance. And that, I feel, has really, really changed. We…It may look like it because there’s lots of committees, but they make the final decisions always. And I can give you an example if you want.

KM: Sure, yeah.
The example from about three years ago was we had been using blackboard for our online portal, and the college of business and school of ministry were using ecollege. They wanted to save money so they wanted to move Constantine to ecollege. And there were a lot of protestations at the senate. I was one of the voices. Not the loudest, but one of them. I would try to look up data and hardly anybody was using ecollege, but they decided, no matter what, they made the decision. And guess what? We got a letter last week, Pearson is ending ecollege, so now we have to go find another one. I mean…and it’s like…and you could have told…if you woulda looked at what colleges were using it…you could see ecollege wasn’t leading to things that they needed…blackboard was evolving; ecollege wasn’t. And it was just simply because they didn’t want to pay the extra money. And so the faculty has to suffer, you have to go and learn another…you gotta learn ecollege, and now we gotta learn another one. And in the mean time they hired like three people, to help you learn ecollege, which is *inaudible* rather uneffective. So those are the things the kinda things that we don’t have any input to. Or we…they’d like to think we do, but they make the decision. Contrary, even to our own.

KM: So they may let you give input, but they don’t really consider it?

RO: Right.

KM: How have the expectations for a professor changed?

RO: Well, at UD there’s been a move to more publish or perish, so that’s been a change. So…I think it’s the motion is there so that we’re more recognized. And so last year…or two years ago, we had to redo the criteria for tenure for every department. I was on rank and tenure for the last two years. I was kinda amazed…and because they’re really pretty stiff, and we’re not a research institution. We’re kinda in transition, so I don’t think they’re exactly following the guidelines to
the letter as a result, but…I think there’s a transition there. Which, I mean, maybe we need to, to
be competitive, I don’t know. But I still hope students remain the number one focus.

KM: Would you say there’s been a difference in what’s expected of you from the
administration?

RO: Yes.

KM: What would that be?

RO: Well…well for example we used to have, a long time ago, in science you taught two courses
and the labs they’re associated with. Then one year it got to be…well in humanities it’s three
courses, 9 hours, so science you better do 9 hours, but there’s always this problem with labs. So
for a while you just teach the labs as extras, extra loads, then we complained about that, so they
would pay you a little extra, and now it’s like no, you’re not gonna do any overload, we have to
hire adjuncts, and stuff like this. I wish we’d go back to the original way because I thought it was
better for us to teach our own labs. It’s less institutional; we’re not a big school. So I think that
was one change. Also, as I mentioned for rank and tenure, you know you really have to get
grants, or write books or papers, do the advanced, to get tenure. Just being a good teacher is not
enough. And the danger is you could get people who are publishing all this stuff and they’re not
good teachers, and they’ll probably get tenure too, so there’s that tension. Which you know, the
committee tries to go through and sort out. So I think we’re doing that, although there’s too
many committees. I can’t complain now; I was gone last semester so I’m not on any committees.
That’s wonderful, I love it. So I think a lot more…it’s called service. You’re supposed to have
three areas, it’s called teaching, scholarship, and service. I think the service amount has gone up.

KM: Has there been any change in the availability and or quality of instructional resources?
RO: Oh I think we have many more now. Actually, I think, I kinda like having an IT department.

You know, a week ago, well two weeks ago tomorrow, my laptop got smashed on the floor…

KM: I heard about that…

RO: I know, and it was killed… and I lost everything on it, but it was nice to go down the hall between classes, I mean that was really hard to continue teaching after that happened.

KM: I’m sure.

RO: Because I had no slides! I thought, “oh, what am I gonna do??” Because I don’t bring any notes to class, because I knew what I was gonna do, but I use the slides to prompt myself so…and it took me, it seemed like forever, to regain my composure. But it was nice to just go to IT between classes and they were trying right away and then when I was done with the second class they had this laptop for me, which doesn’t have anything on it, but that was life. So, I think that’s been good. To have that was just wonderful. I think projectors we have, everything in rooms is wonderful. I know they’ve upgraded a lot of rooms. I love Gorman B because we have the boards that slide and a lot of board space. So I think things have gotten much better that way. And the library also, I’ve had, when I’ve taught seminar, I’ve had them come and teach a class on library resources and science. And I think that’s really nice. I mean I never go to the library, I do everything online, which is nice. Only if there’s something which occasionally happens which is in a book that I can’t get any other way, I’ll see if we can use inter library loan to get it. Otherwise, everything’s online.

KM: Have you noticed the hand of state or federal government in education?

RO: Mhm!
KM: And how has that changed?

RO: I think the federal government has been more imposing. You know I know we have No Child Left Behind, you know...I don’t know what the new one’s called now, but I feel they’ve really come in and are pushing districts, pushing teachers. And I had thought the reason was to make more equality amongst school districts, to give every student the same opportunities. And I think that’s a noble goal. I don’t know if it’s being achieved by the programs that are there. So I just that there’s...I would call it almost an intrusion. And then I’m concerned about all the exams that are given. Cause I hated them when I was in grade school and none of them...not course exams, but standard exams. I just hated those. I just feel they’re butting in almost, rather than...and I guess what I’m getting down to is teachers are put under such restrictions, and I’m talking about grade school, high school...and this goes to the degradation of looking at it as an honorable profession in that they’re not trusted to teach...you can’t just let them teach...and you know when I said I worked with lots, with thousands of high school teachers, and I would say there was rarely one that was not a good teacher. What I could say is there were a lot that didn’t understand physics. And that is what I was trying to help them with. But I thought they could motivate kids, they understood kids, they knew where they were coming from, and I would trust them to go out and teach our materials. I just feel that we’re not trusting them and I think that’s starting to come up to the undergraduate level. I think the accreditation bureaus have gotten too powerful, and you can mark my words, but I bet sometime in the future we’re gonna have to be submitting daily lesson plans, like in grade school or high school. And then I think it’s an insult to what it is to be a professor. Anyway, that’s just my thought.

KM: So there would be, like, below the undergraduate level, there’s much more of the teaching to the test mentality than teaching the student.
RO: That’s what I think, I mean I don’t know for sure, but, from what I read and a few teachers, that’s what I think. And you know the other thing I’m amazed at the number of intrusions in the day in grade school or high school…announcements, rallies, and this and that. I mean, I would love to see like there’s none, let’s just teach during the day. But I mean I’ve been in schools when this has gone on and it’s just…

KM: Has UD changed at all in terms of education?

RO: No, I think it was very solid and it still remains very solid. Yeah, you know, we have some new majors, we have new courses, but I think the quality of the education has not changed.

KM: Have the demographics at the university changed?

RO: A little. We…I think we have a greater percentage of Hispanic students now than we did in the past. Which is good. What’s bad is I felt there was a period in the mid-90s, 2000, we had more Muslim students, and that kinda went down. I don’t know about their socioeconomic background; I think that’s pretty much the same. No, I’d say there’s wealthier students, personally. But there’s a wide range, so…it’s hard to say.

KM: Would you say that the wealthier students is a result of the increase in the cost of education?

RO: Yes, I think so. The other thing that I see, you know I see a lot of students of students now that I had. And I see that they valued their education so well they want their son or daughter to come here, and I think that that’s really quite good. And I think it just shows that we’ve got a really solid education. Which is all due to the faculty [said jokingly]. I guess I would tie in one other thing, I feel that good faculty are good pushers, that you push students. You push them not only to get things done but you push them and challenge them. You challenge their thoughts; you
challenge the way they look at things. You challenge what they can do. I think that’s a good point.

KM: Do you think teachers, professors, like, have the reign to challenge their students that they used to?

RO: Well this is…I think the professors have changed. I think, and again I’m generalizing, because I can’t…there’s gonna be a full range...I feel…well let me put it this way. When I first came here I used to go into the chair with every exam and talk about what I’d be asking, talk about what I’m doing in the class, and stuff like this, and faculty don’t really do that to chairs anymore. You know if you’re chair you’re just a pig pusher. Because what sometimes happened, and it started in the 90s I think, is that you’re…they think that they come into a job and you should know everything. And you have nothing to gain from anybody else, and you know it all. And…there’s probably a little fear too to ask somebody else who’s more experienced. I think that has happened, and so…that’s happened everywhere. The other thing is…and I can’t say this for certainty…but I just have a feeling…there’s a large number of faculty who view it as a job; as a stepping stone to another job. And not a career at this university. They’re not engaged with this university. So, that’s again just a feeling. And I’ve talked to some other people who have that same feeling and I think there’s something there. The other thing is at the university we don’t get to know each other as faculty. The only way you do it is if we’re on a committee together. You don’t have really the social opportunities. And likewise, new faculty just see older faculty as names, and never realize what they have done, and their contributions; the institution has no memory of people. When you’re gone, you’re gone. There’s no memory, by the institution.
In the physics majors themselves, that you’ve seen over the years, has there been in change in them, in their skill level or personality or demographic shifts, or anything?

Goes up and down. It’s…I don’t see any trend. We have quiet classes, we have vocal classes, we have classes that none go to graduate school, classes that everybody goes to graduate school. It varies quite a bit, and I don’t know why. Although I do have a suspicion at something…I…would like to try an experiment…you know we do advising, basically a faculty…they dole out students. I think what would be good is instead of getting some extra every year, you really stay with one set for four years, and you’re like a form master that they have at Cistercian. And you work with many aspects of—even if they’re not in your major, you’re still working with them. I think there’s a bit more responsibility to the advisor, and it’s a different model. So, I think…well I would just say that last year’s graduating class I loved. And the physics majors, it happened that I taught them their first…I had to be all their advisors, and I taught them their entire freshman year because of sabbaticals, and then, you know, knew them so well from that, so I had like three semesters in the room, which, was exceptional because normally I don’t even teach freshman…and I think that helped a lot in forming a cohesive group and pushing them to think about graduate school, in which all went to graduate school but one is working. But I think the groups vary at UD. And you can’t say…you’d need to do research on this and explore it.

Do you have any predictions for the future of how higher education may change or remain the same? Whether overall, or specifically in physics?

Well I think…tenure’s gonna be done with. I don’t think there will be tenure in twenty more years. You know, I think the statistics are, nationwide, most teaching is done by non-tenured people, and even on a tenure track. Which is okay, that’s okay. I’m neither pro or against tenure.
But I think that’s gonna effect stability, I think it’s another sense of you’re just an employee.

Like all employees we can fire you or hire you. We can do what we want, and so…I think that’s gonna be something that’ll happen. And I also think there’s gonna be more intrusion into classrooms by…you can’t discuss that, you can’t do this…we want a lesson plan to check up what you’re doing every day. So…I think it’ll be overall…that’s kinda nice…it’s gonna be a much more controlled by government. In physics, I would say they are probably having more courses to…to go the Caltech route almost, where you can take more science…I hope it doesn’t come that way, sacrificing the core here, but I think there’s…there’s always a tension there, I think that’s gonna still be there and increase, because…science is so wide, it’s gonna be…you have to start focusing to go into something earlier, because it’s so wide.

KM: So there’ll be an earlier focus on what you’re interested in instead of learning a broader…

RO: Yeah, I think so, I think so. You know, the Cowan’s had the idea that the first two years are supposed to be the broad experience and then, the discipline was supposed to come after that. I think it’s gonna have to come down to maybe the first year’s the broad experience. But…and I’m not in favor necessarily one way or another, I just have a feeling…

KM: That’s just where you see it going.

RO: Yeah, I’d say that’s where I see it going. I was worried about online courses, but I’m not so worried about online courses. The administration has been pushing them. I don’t think at good colleges they’re really…that important. There may be some, and they’re helpful for kids to catch up or something, but I don’t think they’re a norm. And I don’t think they should be for an undergraduate education. A graduate education, in some areas, I think it’s fine. Like business, and the school of ministry, I think that’s fine. Can’t do it in science, but I think their online
courses are fine. But I… I don’t think there’s gonna be any increase at the undergraduate level. The other thing, that I think in education in general, I… I personally wish will happen, I don’t know if it will, is I kind of wish high school would go back and have like the two tracks where you had the people who go to college and the people who weren’t gonna go to college. I think... you know there’s the feeling that well, if you’re on the other track, you’re not as smart, you’re not... whatever, but... and I’ve struggled with this for dozens of years. Because I never would like to tell someone, “no, you’re gonna go on that track.” There has to be some way to be able to change. But I think we need a lot of people who necessarily don’t need to go to college. I... you know my family never went to college, and I had uncles who were master machinists, and tile setters, who made a lot of money, a lot more money than my father made. And I think that’s kind of fine... you know? I think you have to respect that. And I just think there’s a real big tension there, and I think that’s part of the problem with the federal government coming in and saying, “everybody... everybody’s gonna be doing calculus in high school now.” And I don’t think there needs to be calculus in high school. What would we do if we said, “everyone’s gonna come in and take woodshop”? I think that would be a good idea because quite honestly I wish I had taken more technical courses because I wish I could... as you get older, it would be nice to know how to fix things around the house, make some things... I have some friends who are like that, so, I really admire people who can do that. Wow, that’s fantastic.

KM: So you think that the technical aspect should be more exalted than it is now and not such an extreme focus on solely the academic.

RO: Yeah, right. And I think there should be dual track. And I remember a long time ago when I was at Caltech I went to Australia and I was giving a colloquium in Melbourne, and at lunch, they brought up this struggle, that they were in the British system, they have the two tracks, and
Australia was trying to move more towards the American system and not have that two track in high school and they just didn’t know if it was gonna work. And I do not know if it worked. At times I’ve wondered about it but I don’t know how to really research to find out if they’re switching, and I don’t think they’ve completely switched to our system but…there’s a tension there.

KM: And then, just in general, is there anything else you’d like to mention, or say, or point out?

RO: In education?

KM: In anything!

RO: Well I will state one thing, because I think it’s tied to education. I decry the downfall of rural America. I think everything is…the government needs to be wiser and…give incentives, make companies build plants or stuff not all in the big cities. For example, I am just perplexed by people that move to Dallas. I mean…I came here because there was a TV series, and it sounded really cool. I hate to say that was one of the reasons…and it was this up and coming city and there was that. But you know, beauty wise, climate wise…I don’t think there’s much to offer that other places have. Yet it’s, you know the population has more than doubled since I’ve been…and they have all the congestion and they have to build more highways and all that that goes along with it and I know it’s because there’s jobs and that’s because companies locate here and build. You know, TI has done a lot here. Why can’t it be not here, but…well you don’t want to go to Austin, because Austin already has like Dell and enough places, but you go to places like to um…oh…let’s see…I’m trying to think of…west of here, about two hours, it’s a city. Not a really small one but why not just build there? And that helps towns in between to flourish. We’re becoming so centralized and I’ve seen this in the upper peninsula. Once the mines shut down, the
economy just collapsed. The only economy there is logging now. And that’s cutting back too because we’re more digital. And so…I just…I was wracking my brain, thinking how could we get more jobs to this area, just cause…kids grow up and they go away and they don’t wanna come back until they retire. ‘Cause they love it, but there’s no jobs. And so I don’t like that centralization. I just think we have to find ways… and I drive through all of these ghost towns, especially in west Texas. It’s like, wow, that’s sad. I wish we had a program to sustain them.

Anyway. When I become president… Anything else?

KM: Is there anything else that comes to mind for you?

RO: No, I think I talked too much.

KM: You never talk too much. Well, I think that is it for me, so…

RO: Okay…now when is this due?

KM: The project as a whole is due April 25th, so I’m just kinda getting ahead in terms of the actual interview, and I can and will provide you with a copy of the work I do. I can also send you a copy of the recording of the interview if you’d like, and things like that.

RO: How many students are in this class?

KM: 12, about 12.

RO: Is everyone interviewing other professors, or…?

KM: No, some people are interviewing just other people. The requirements are that the person is not a family member, and is 25 years older than yourself.

RO: Okay, okay. Because I was gonna suggest that it would be kinda neat if…are you doing a presentation or anything of your work in class?
KM: I think so; we haven’t gotten quite...

RO: It’d be nice if when they gave presentations if all the people who were interviewed to come and get to meet each other, but also, listen and hear other aspects, too. And then they can have refreshments, I know education has such a big budget…always throwing parties…So, that would be good.

KM: Okay. Yeah, so I will keep you updated, I mean it might be a while before there is an update, but I’ll let you know when the presentation is done, or the paper, and all that, and I’ll make sure I send all of that to you.

RO: Okay

KM: Okay

RO: Thank you

KM: Thank you!

This was fun!

Yeah!