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Harold L. Nixon Interview, Student Affairs, Wright State University

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Profiles of African-Americans That Helped Shape Wright State University

Interview with Harold L. Nixon

Date of Interview: September 2, 1992

Interviewer: Alyce Earl Jenkins, College of Education and Human Services

Interviewee: Harold L. Nixon, Student Affairs

[Note: Video and audio skip at beginning until about a large break at 3:02]

guest— [tape skips] —Harold L. Nixon, who has been Vice President for Student Affairs
here at— [tape skips] —since— [tape skips] —Harold, thanks so very much for allowing
me to interview— [tape skips] —today.

Harold L. Nixon: Pleased to be with you Alyce.

AJ: Thank you. Rather than begin our conversation— [tape skips] —[St]ate University,
tell me a little bit— [tape skips] —

HN: I— [tape skips] —at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. I did my Master’s at
North Carolina Central University, and I did my doctorate— [tape skips] —and as far as
my professional background is concerned, I was employed in an historically-black
institution, Fayetteville State University, in Fayetteville, North Carolina for several years.
As a matter of fact, close to nineteen years. And I worked in various positions there; I
was Director of Financial Aid for ten years, I was Associate Dean for Student Affairs,
and then I became Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. And I did that work, as a matter
of fact, until I came here to— [tape skips] —88.

AJ: I— [tape skips] —experience at Fisk University. I think that I’m as young as you
are— [tape breaks] —Fisk at the— [tape skips] —considered one of the most
prest[ig]ious schools around. And the people who attended Fisk were really considered
the cream of the crop. So is that an assumption—was it really like that? Because I had
to go to a state school. I went to a state school and we always looked up to the people
who went to Fisk because it was private.

HN: Well I can tell you Alyce that Fisk was the best thing that happened to me at that
time. I came from Smithfield, North Carolina, very very small town of less than six
thousand people at that time. And it was certainly the better thing for me to have the opportunity to go to an institution like Fisk University, which as you said, at that time Fisk was considered one of the elite, top historically-black institutions in the country. And to interact with individuals from all over the country and all over the world, as a matter of fact, because we, at that time, had a high number of students from other countries. Probably at Fisk and Howard University, those two institutions had people from all over the world. So it was a really, really great experience for me, and as a ma— [large break, 3:02]

—or my family felt that we were out of the water, so to speak. But I think that one does encounter some feeling of, “we’ve got to make sure that individuals—that we get to know other individuals and individuals get to know us.”

AJ: When you mention about the first challenge, change in weather, I can recall when I came to Ohio from Alabama, from Birmingham, in 1958 and in September, I think the temperature was like forty-five or fifty degrees and I was wearing my heaviest coat because it was so cold for me and it took me a while to adjust to that.

HN: Well but it was different for me. You know, when I came here, as a matter of fact, I had heard about cold weather and that kind of thing, but I came in August. And I believe that probably that was a record year in terms of the hot temperature. It was in fact hotter here in Dayton, Ohio than it was in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and Fayetteville is one of the hotspots of North Carolina.

AJ: I see.

HN: As a matter of fact it’s hotter in that area—

AJ: I see.

HN: —because of the sand hills than the parts like Greensboro and Raleigh. Well the temperature here was hotter than it was there. And I can tell you that was probably an adjustment too.

AJ: Okay. Now you mentioned that the other challenge was that the people had to become accustomed to you and your style of leadership, and you had to get used to them, used to this environment. Now, what are we looking at, five years later, do you feel that you have established a profile as far as your leadership style—that people have some feel for what you expect and what you want, what your philosophy is? How do you compare now, today, with 1988?

HN: Well, Alyce, I think the longer you work with individuals, the longer individuals see you in the position that you’re in, the easier, if you will, it becomes; the more understanding people have of you and the more understanding you have of other
individuals because it is not just a one-way street. I mean, when we talk of leadership sometimes, we think well that individual has to make certain that everything works the way he or she wants it to work. Well colleges today and, I guess I don’t have to tell you, leadership styles have had to change simply because individuals want to be more active and involved in the decisions and so forth that are being made. I think yes is the answer to the question. I believe that individuals understand that I would—that I do believe in somewhat shared leadership. At the same time, I think individuals understand that, you know, somewhere somebody has to make the decision, and they know that I don’t run away from making the decision that has to be made.

AJ: Very good. Now we’re talking—you’re vice president of the school of student affairs here at Wright State. And we’re just kind of generally been talking about your background and your early challenges, but I want to skip to an area that I think is really important, and that is your relationship and your contact with students. And I know often when you’re in charge of a unit, like your unit, that it may not allow you sufficient time to interact with students. So do you ever have opportunities, make opportunities, to interact with students so that you can kind of have a few for what they’re thinking?

HN: Well, I do; and you’re right, because of the large number of things that occur on a campus of this size. It is sometimes difficult to have the frequency of interaction as you would want to have, but the way you do that, obviously, is to participate in some of the programs that students have. For example, students invite speakers to the campus through their various organizations and you’re there to make sure that they see you, you try to be as visible as you can. Then on top of that, you always make sure that have “the open door,” where individuals get an opportunity to come and see you one on one. I don’t know which has the most value to students, whether they have coming to see you or whether your appearance, being with them. But I think it’s important to try both, and that’s what we try to do.

AJ: We have spent a lot of time on my introductory part, but I still want to go through all of my questions. And so since we’re talking about students and interacting with them, I have some pictures here from the international friendship day. I think those are pretty interesting. I understand that we have about three hundred and sixty international students here from fifty countries, with the largest number of students being here from China and India. What kind of relationship do you have with them—contact do you have with them other than, you know, attending these kinds of affairs?

HN: Well we have an office, as you know, an international student office, and they do a number of things in helping international students acclimate to their “new environment” here on the campus. In addition to that, we have a student exchange program, where students from this country, from our institution actually, get an opportunity to visit China, Brazil, and Japan. And those students get an opportunity to come spend time here with
our students on the campus. And they do as we do when we’re in that country, what we call “home stays.” That kind of exchange program has been extremely valuable to the students and to the institution and to, I think, the relationships that we have with other countries.

AJ: In checking around and preparing for the interview, I was told that we have a six-percent enrollment of African-American students here at Wright State University, and that’s a substantial increase from when I came here in 1972. What kinds of programs do you have supporting African-American students who are here at Wright State?

HN: One of the programs that I’m really pleased with and proud of, actually, is the C.J. McLin Scholars program that was introduced, as a matter of fact, when I arrived. And I feel like your audience knows C.J. McLin very well, so I won’t try to describe all of the things that he did and contributions he made, but we felt the need to establish a program in his name for students who are minority students who are enrolled here at the university with the notion that these students would, in addition to working with other students on the campus, would go back into the community to speak with students about higher education, about attending higher education. It is a scholarship program, but we call it more or less, if you will, a scholarship service program. In other words, students receive money to come to the institution, but at the same time, the service that the student is asked to do is back in the community. It reminds me of some of the kinds of programs that President Clinton is now talking about. So that is, I think, an extremely important program. We have a number of students and we bring in perhaps twenty students a year into the program.

AJ: I see. Now, when you think in terms of diversity and we talk about the international students and the African-American students, I also think about students with disabilities and that particular program and Wright State's reputation in that area. What are your plans for disability services as far as the future is concerned.

HN: Well we have what we believe is—and, I think, it’s not just us—but I think we are viewed as one of the leading institutions in the country in terms of the kinds of services and the disability services program that we have here for students. It is, I guess, probably I should say that students of practically all disabilities—I mean when I say that I mean very severe disabilities—find opportunities here. The terrain is easier to move in; the tunnels are easier to move about in; we have attendant care services in our student health area that helps those students take care of their needs; we have learning disability services. We would, I guess I would say to you, that as far as the program is concerned, there are no restrictions, actually, on the program. As long as students believe and we believe that students can function here, there are no restrictions. So the program is somewhat self-perpetuating, if you will…
AJ: Okay, very good.

HN: …rather than an expansion as it goes, or, I would say, it sort of makes itself grow.

AJ: Okay. We didn’t get to talk about the organization of Student Affairs Office and your $33 million budget and concern that students may have that are most pressing, but my time is up. But I would like to ask you one final question, and that is what do you consider your greatest or your most rewarding experience here at Wright State as Vice President of Student Affairs?

HN: Well, I think I would say, Alyce, almost every time I’m at graduation and I see students who I know who’ve had to struggle to make ends meet, to pay to attend school, who faced, I think, severe adversities, would probably be the most rewarding kind of experience I guess I could to. So it occurs more than one time for me; it occurs, actually, twice a year—as you know we have graduation in December and also in June. I mean, I could think of many other things, but in an overall way, to be onstage and to see those individuals you know, as I know, had to struggle to come through and see them receive their degrees is a great reward.

AJ: And I think that when you complete the renovation of the University Center for Student Affairs, that that will be another rewarding experience.

HN: It certainly will. It’s been one that we’ve struggled with for a while, and I must say that the leadership here has been absolutely superb in helping to make sure that that Center comes online. Board Chairman Allan Rinzler has been with this project all the way; Paige Mulhollan, president, has been with this project all the way, and of course we’ve all been, our student services people have all been there making sure that the building comes online as it’s supposed to, and we’re proud to say that somewhere in 1995, we expect to be in the new facility.

AJ: Very good. Well thank you so much Harold for joining me today, and I apologize for running a little over time, but you were so interesting, it was difficult for me to discontinue the interview. Thanks very much.

HN: Well I have enjoyed it very much, Alyce. Thank you for inviting me.