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Robert Dolphin interview, Professor Emeritus, College of Business and Former Dean of Graduate Studies, Wright State University

Robert Wagley
Wright State University - Main Campus

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: September 7, 2004

Interviewer: Robert Wagley
Professor Emeritus, College of Business

Interviewee: Robert Dolphin
Professor Emeritus, College of Business; Former Dean of School
of Graduate Studies

BW: I'm Bob Wagley, interviewing Bob Dolphin, September 7, in Beavercreek, Ohio. Tell me about your personal background and how you came to Wright State.

BD: I received a Doctorate in Business Administration at Michigan State University, 1964. I served on the faculty at Florida State University, 1964-1967. I came to Wright State University in the summer of 1967, the year that the legislature formed the university from the 2 branch campuses, the branch campuses of Miami of Ohio and Ohio State.

BW: Talk about your most memorable personal experience at Wright State.

BD: That's a difficult question, because there are a lot of wonderful memories at Wright State. Probably, in a general sense, the most important one was how dynamic the institution was. We had moved faculty in from all over the country from various, different stages of their careers, and we were writing new policies for the university, forming a new university, and it was exciting times, because in the business room we really put the foundation, the direction for the institution for a long time to come. I was still quite young in the business, I was associate professor, and I'd only been out of graduate school three years. One of the first things I remember was sitting on a university-wide committee to write the promotion and tenure documents for the university. It was a great writing experience for me, sitting with people who were new, [and] people who had been in the business for many years.

BW: What was your role as a faculty member and staff member in the early years of the university?

BD: I came as the chairman of the Finance Department at the school, in the College of Business. We were probably called the School of Business at the time. The department consisted of two people, myself and Dick Williams. Over the next six years, we grew as I recall to six faculty, that was the [balance of other departments?], and by the time I left the department six years later, [there was] 18 faculty, but that included administrative [staff?] as well.

BW: You were also involved with the graduate school, I believe.

BD: Yes, after being at Wright State for six years, I became the Associate Dean of the Graduate School. Art MacKinney was the Dean, I served as Associate Dean for four years, and then Dean of the Graduate School when he left for four more years, and I left the university in 1981. But going back to the Business School, it was exciting to build a new business school, because at that point, we had no recognition nationally. We would say “Wright State”, and people would say, “You mean Wayne State”. I felt it was quite a challenge, and it was interesting to make [progress?] and get people to recognize the university. And then in the Graduate School, it was particularly interesting to Art MacKinney and me because we were building a lot of the graduate programs. While we were there, I forget the number but we put in several graduate degrees- there was a Computer Science Masters degree, a Liberal Arts degree, a Masters level for people who were engineers or who were engineering graduates and wanted more education, a Professional Accountancy program, a Doctorate in Biomedical Sciences, and PhD’s to support the Medical School. So those were exciting times.

BW: Could you describe the character of Wright State during the early years?

BD: I touched on the character earlier. I would describe it as a high quality orientation. They had what I considered a reasonable dialogue between research and scholarship, and teaching. We were requiring research and scholarship, but we were also requiring high quality teaching and interest in students. It was entrepreneurial, we were able to try a lot of new things, the work was different, and if something didn’t work we abandoned it. I’ve never seen that at another university, and I think that primarily, more than at other organizations, it prided itself in establishing itself as much more flexible.

BW: What were the important issues facing the institution; problems, issues, obstacles?

BD: One of the challenging ones for the president, who was Brage Golding, was to meld the branch campus of Miami of Ohio with the branch campus of Ohio State University, because we were now Wright State University, and each institution has a different culture. We had to develop the Wright State University culture, and that created conflict. One of the things that Brage Golding did, almost immediately after becoming president, was he declared there would be no colleges or schools until we were all capable of being one. Because when he came, the College of Science and Engineering, I think that’s what it was called, from Ohio State was a college, we needed schools or divisions, a school of business, and as they went around campus, he said there will be no colleges or schools until you’re all ready. I don’t remember the timeframe, not too many years later, we created the college structure within the university. That was very important, he understood the need to force a cultural change and to force us to develop our own culture.

BW: That touches on the role of administration, but was the role of administration in the early years of the university different than in the present administration?

BD: Well it may be, apart from the (pause)... To respond sufficiently, I worked with several universities, all of them older, more established universities than Wright State, and it seemed to me that Wright State, the administration was very important in identifying the directions we needed to take, and working with the faculty to do that. As opposed to what I've observed in older universities, where they seemed to be more reliant on the faculty to come up with new programs, [and] directions to take degree programs. That's my impression; otherwise I don't think there's a great deal of difference, attending to administrative responsibilities and faculty responsibilities.

BW: What was the relationship between you [faculty], the students, the college, during your tenure? You had mentioned that you had started as chair with one other faculty, and then grew to eighteen, and there was also a change in the number of students?

BD: One of my strong impressions from the early days was that there was a tremendous, pent-up desire [and] demand in the Dayton area for a four-year degree. In the Business School, we had, initially, quite a few older students. By that I mean their late twenties, early thirties, who already had been working for a number of years and were just hungry to get more education. We ran classes day and night, so you could work full time and get your degree in a reasonable period, as long as you were willing to commit yourself to it. So having a more mature student body than which you typically see in a university, I think, made quite a difference in the classroom. In the School of Business, we made a considerable effort to make sure we kept the classroom, as best you can, connected with practices as well as the theoretical model.

BW: A question on describing how your college, school or department has grown. I think you probably have already answered that. Do you want to add anything?

BD: Well, I'm very taken by the fact that the university has 18,000 students, I'm told, in 2004, and 23 years ago or so, as I recall, the legislature expected or required 5,000 students before they would pass legislation for Wright State University. That's a substantial amount of growth. I'm also impressed by the ongoing commitment to the science and research and technology which is appropriate for this area. I'm really not familiar enough with the composition of the university today to comment much more than that.

BW: If you were asked to describe Wright State then, in one word, what would it be?

BD: Dynamic.

BW: The next question is describing Wright State now, which, as you pointed out (laughs), I don't think that's a fair question.

BD: Well, it's one I'd be foolish to act like I knew the answer to, but it's much different in that, at least typically, as institutions mature- educational institutions or business or non-profit- they tend to become less flexible. More powerful procedures are put in place and more rigidity, and certainly higher education throughout the country is being subjected to more and more controls, and I'm sure that is the case at Wright State as well.

BW: If you had the opportunity to do something over at Wright State, what would it be?

BD: This might not sound like an appropriate answer, but I can't think of anything I'd do differently, because of the fact that we were trying lots of things and at that point in the history of the university, we were willing to quit them if they weren't working well and try something else new. I don't mean to opine, but I think we did everything exactly right. I can't think of anything that we really would have done a lot differently.

BW: Do you think the university student attitudes towards education have changed between the time you started teaching and the time you left the presidency a month ago? [Note: Bob Dolphin served as president at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado]

BD: Well, I hope the changes over the last, um, [pause]... Most of us would probably agree that the attitudes of students and that relationship have changed immensely over the last 25 years. I think you probably could pick any college around the country, we're all experiencing less ability among students, I hate to say this, but among faculty and administrators, too, but particularly among students. Less maturity, you have the feeling sometimes it's more like high school in terms of maturity, lack of respect for faculty, and so on.

BW: This reflects some on the next question of major changes that higher education is going through today, and Wright State will probably be affected by that, like some of those other institutions.

BD: Well, as background, you should be aware that I just spent fifteen years as chief financial officer of a state institution, and the last two as president. With that background, you can't help but [pause]... the first thing that comes to mind would be lack of financial support. The decline of financial support over the years, in particular for state institutions, and the increase in demand for quality, increased quality with less funding. So the combination of declining funding, demands for a much higher level of accountability, and a student body, except in the elite, selective schools, that's much less capable, in my opinion, than they were in the past at doing their work.

BW: I know that you were active in making Wright State as barrier-free for handicapped students as it could be. Would you like to comment on your contributions in that area?

BD: Well, let me begin by saying that I'm very proud of what Wright State has done in that regard. I'd like to share a little story about how, in some ways, presentations are lucky to get it right. Because at Wright State, when I came I think we had three buildings, they were connected by tunnels, and the utility tunnels were large enough to walk in. One day, Brage Golding called Bob Wade and I, another faculty member in the School of Business, both with some experience in dealing with accessibility and said, "Would you guys look over the architectural drawings for our next building?", and he had us look at them because of our background in accessibility. We looked over the drawings, and they were not acceptable. They were very close to letting the contracts to build the building that were not acceptable at all, and this was back probably in 1969, before there was much knowledge or interest countrywide in accessibility. I'll never forget how many red marks Bob and I put on these drawings, and the consternation it created for the architects to go on. That seemed to be a turning point, because when that building was constructed and we came so close to constructing an unacceptable building, after that we never heard much more about it. Because I think institutionally there was a group established, I know there was, to deal with accessibility and have responsibility for ensuring that as we developed, we were accessible. The result of that was to become, as far as I know, the most accessible school in the country and by the time I left in 1981, 14 years later, we may have had 100 to 200 students here in wheelchairs. It was wonderful for them, the way they could get between buildings without going outside, the elevators that had been [purpose built?], over the years there was a lot of bragging about Wright State in regard to that.

BW: Do you have any additional thoughts, was there anything I should have asked that I didn't that you want to share about your stint at Wright State?

BD: Let me just say that I have had a wonderful career since I left Wright State, but sometimes it does occur to me that maybe I should have stayed, because the university has done such a wonderful job.