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Dr. Robert J. Kegerreis interview (1) conducted on October 29, 1984 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

Robert J. Kegerreis

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

School of Medicine Oral History Project

INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Interview date: October 29, 1984

Interviewer: James St. Peter (JS)

Interviewee: Robert J. Kegerreis (RK)
 President, Wright State University
 Interview 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

[Beginning of recorded material]

James St. Peter: This is the first in a series of interviews with the President of Wright State University, Dr. Robert J. Kegerreis, The date is October 29, 1984, the time is 9 o'clock AM, and we are in Dr. Kegerreis's office in the executive wing of Allyn Hall at Wright State University. Can you tell me a little bit about your background prior to coming to Wright State, Dr. Kegerreis?

Robert Kegerreis: Yes, that shouldn't be too difficult. I attended Ohio State University and got a bachelor's degree- a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics- and did one of those double degree programs in the College of Commerce and Administration, as they called it. I got a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Trade- a Bachelor of Science in Business and Foreign Trade- and then I went to Navy Midshipmen's School and went off to win World War II for the freedom fighters of the world.

JS: Is that at Annapolis, the midshipmen school?

RK: No, because of the mobilization, Annapolis couldn't handle all the need for officers, just as West Point couldn't handle the need for Army officers and so on, so they in addition to expanding the ROTC program, they also offered college students a variety of programs that supposedly enabled them to finish their college work in an accelerated period of time, and then

go to a special training site to emerge as freshly minted officers. So, I went to Northwestern's Midshipmen's School, and three and a half months or so later, I was magically transformed into an ensign in the United States Navy. That's the equivalent of a 2nd lieutenant in the Army.

JS: And you spent the war in the Pacific?

RK: No, I was assigned to destroyers, and reported to Norfolk to the USS Macomb, and at that time it was on North Atlantic duty. I hadn't been very familiar with the North Atlantic, having grown up in the Midwest, and that was extremely treacherous, dangerous duty. We were supposedly hunting German U-boats, and instead we were fighting for our lives just to stay afloat in the North Atlantic wintertime. Then we participated in the invasion of Southern France, and we fought German U-boats, and German night fighters, and German shore batteries, and things like that in the Mediterranean, which was a paradisiacal place to wage a war, I must say. Spent some time in North Africa, with the British Army, then after... I forget exactly what date it was, but anyhow, after V-E Day, we- no, we came back to the states before Germany actually surrendered, and we went through an overhaul in Charleston, and then went to the Pacific. Our principal engagement in the Pacific was at Okinawa, where we became part of the infamous radar picket screen, which attempted to intercept kamikaze planes on their way from the Japanese homeland to the Army troops and Air Force on Okinawa- or around Okinawa- and the main naval force in the Pacific, which by that time was around Okinawa also. Radar pickets were about sixty miles north of Okinawa, between that island and the islands of Japan, and it was a very effective strategy in protecting much of the Okinawa operation from suicide planes, but it was a terrible price to pay. Our ten-ship squadron was all wiped out in that. It was the biggest loss that the Navy has ever suffered in history, it was to the kamikaze attacks of those days, thousands of planes involved. Then we were put out of action, as I say, and after a brief period of further action following our repairs, we led the fleet into Tokyo Bay for the surrender ceremony, and that was the end of my World War II experiences.

JS: You came back to Ohio State then?

RK: Yes, I came back to Ohio State for a graduate degree, and then went to the Federal Reserve System of Cleveland, the Cleveland branch of the Federal Reserve System, as a junior economist, and I wound up doing industry analyses, and writing a weekly column on business activities for the media of Cleveland. And it was a great time, we by that time had our first child, but while it was a very rewarding time, I was too restless and ambitious to handle the- I don't know what you'd call it, the calm, uncompetitive atmosphere of the Federal Reserve System. So, I accepted my father's invitation to return to the family business in Eastern Ohio, which was a variety store retailing enterprise, and spent the next fifteen years with him. We expanded, and opened up new stores, but the discount stores revolution sort of stopped us in our tracks, and I became a little bored with doing the same things over and over. We had a store in Zanesville,

Ohio where there was a branch of Ohio U., so I started teaching economics and marketing there, after-hours. I found I enjoyed it very much, and we had a family conference and decided maybe returning to teaching- I had done teaching at Ohio State when I was a graduate teaching assistant- and we thought maybe that would give me more fulfillment, and at the same time, it might give me more time with my family. By this time, my son was in junior high school, and one daughter was in a special school for the retarded, and the third daughter was very young. So, we thought that might work out for the betterment of the whole family, and so I began investigating it, and found out that before I became a serious, full-time college faculty member, I'd have to have a PhD. So, I did a matrix analysis of the nearest PhD programs in business, and checked out the University of Pittsburgh, and Case Western, and Carnegie Mellon, and Ohio State. We had a company plane, which I flew, and I thought maybe for the first break-in period I could commute by plane. Well, it turned out that it was no contest, Ohio State was the only one of the four that had a university airport with a shuttle bus. That's how I made the momentous decision about where to get my PhD. By this time, I was in my forties, and I had assumed that I would be welcomed to any doctoral program in business, sort of like a conquering hero, an authentic expert in our midst. I discovered to my dismay and eventual anger that far from that, doctoral programs looked askance at anybody over twenty-five, and were seriously wondering as to whether or not somebody that old would make significant contributions to the discipline, and to the university that awarded the degree. That is to say, their reputation and notoriety, and notice across the country. They weren't sure they could bother spending that much time on me.

JS: So, at the ripe old age of twenty-five, you were considered too old?

RK: No, no. This was in my- I was early forties. I said that-

JS: Okay, that's right.

RK: By the age of thirty, the doctoral programs in those days began to lose interest in you. Because, you see, they want someone who is youthful and who is going to spend the next thirty years spewing out papers, that will in a sense carry the flag of the granting doctoral institution. They thought also that being of that advanced age, I might not be able to hack it. And I thought at the very least that they would excuse me from taking the graduate business school test- which we now call the GMT, the Graduate Management Test- and they said no, far from it. They especially wanted me to take it, to see if my brain had ossified or something. Well, I was filled with anger and resentment, but determination, because they had issued a challenge. I suppose it might have been the best thing they could have done. So, anyhow, I got a good grade on the exam, and they grudgingly accepted me into the program at Ohio State, and I commuted by plane for a while, and then finally buckled down to the rigor of it, and took an apartment in Columbus, and spent four or five days a week at Ohio State- this was eventually- and the weekends and some nights at my business in Eastern Ohio. By this time, I had recruited a general manager,

with the notion of eventually selling it, or at least turning over the senior management to him. Back at Ohio State, I was discovering some ancient [??] and a set of unchallenged beliefs that were really stultifying. For example, not to waste your time with anecdotal history, I noticed that halfway through the program, ninety-some percent of those involved with the program intended to be university teachers, professors. But none of them, that I could detect, had any teaching experience except as graduate assistants, which we all were, of course. It seemed to me that since Ohio State had a relatively prestigious school of education, including an outstanding graduate and doctoral program, that maybe on an intra-collegial basis, they might be interested in giving us some fundamentals of teaching. So, I organized a no-credit seminar of the graduate students-doctoral students, interviewed several high-ranking professors in the College of Education, who were charmed and excited by the idea of a doctoral group actually wanting to learn how to teach. And we had it all set up when I was discovered by the program directors of the College of Administrative Science, and was given a severe lecture on going outside my proper bailiwick. In general, it summed up to saying that if they didn't think of the idea and they didn't think it was necessary, then I had no business trying it. The only other anecdote I think worthwhile is I discovered that one should not start on a dissertation while in the middle of coursework, because that would indicate an undue optimism about passing the field exams, and being admitted formally to candidacy. It was unseemly. Second, it wasn't fair, because the coursework was so rigorous that you were not supposed to have any time to think about a dissertation. That seemed to me to be so inefficient that I ignored those instructions, and started interviewing faculty members in the doctoral program about their own favorite research topics, because I discovered something called a dissertation committee, which was necessary, and if they weren't interested in what you were doing, there was no way you would ever get your dissertation approved. So, by a tedious process, I finally picked a topic, and began in the course of the other coursework, researching the library part of the research, and by the time I was approaching the end of my coursework, I had the research design perfected, and began to hire fellow students as interviewers and survey researchers, and got the cooperation of some businesses, and actually before I passed my field exams I had collected to voluminous data that formed the basis for the dissertation. I had discovered in the doctoral program that only fifty percent of those that finish the coursework ever got their PhD. Fifty percent. A terrible and tragic waste. Because the coursework takes an absolute minimum of two years, and sometimes three. I was staggered by that, and so then I did a little more investigation- this was all on my own- and the reason was that most people exhausted their financial resources and had to get a job, and the rigors of the job and the interest one took in a job after having so much time spent in the classrooms and teaching, that it became absorbing, and they lost contact with their dissertation committee- which was bound to change in composition, and subsequent people weren't interested or committed- and pretty soon the time period allowed for completing a dissertation had to pass, and so they joined the vast throng of people out there called "ABD's". Dave Atwater is one of those people.

JS: ABD?

RK: “All but Dissertation”. Instead of PhD, its AbD. That’s an informal, unofficial title, but it’s widely used.

JS: Do you feel that your business experience gave you a big edge in graduate school?

RK: Yes. Yes, it did. It allowed me to challenge some of the dogmatic statements made by professors. It made me more analytical and less accepting of what I read, what I heard. A lot of my young colleagues in the doctoral program had come straight through from kindergarten to the PhD program, and by that time they had been so battered and conformed by the educational system that they didn’t do much inquiring. Don’t misunderstand me, they were very bright and many of them were quite analytical. But they weren’t sufficiently critical. They weren’t sufficiently discriminating in their view of material. They didn’t ask enough questions about the statistical bases for some of the statements made in textbooks and lectures. Just the whole realm of not being sufficiently skeptical. The other thing is that my business background I think made me much more organized and much more goal oriented. I tended to- I’m a procrastinator by nature, I leave things until midnight of the night before, you know, and all of that. I stay up nights getting things done even today. But at the same time, with the demands of the business that I was still operating by remote control, the problems of trying to keep the family remembering that there was a husband and a father around, together with teaching at the university, and trying to get started on a dissertation early, made me allocate my time almost to the second, and that in turn makes you much more efficient. The best grades as an undergraduate I ever got was when I was overwhelmed with work. I was working as a waiter at the faculty club, I was working part-time in a factory, and having a very heavy social schedule trying to become engaged, and at the same time I was taking extra hours. And I did better than I ever did when I had plenty of time to do all those things. So, anyhow, yes, the answer to your question is yes. So, I was on guard against this happening to me, namely that I might become so interested in life after the doctoral program that I wouldn’t complete the dissertation, and another reason I wanted to get started while I was still there and had the faculty advisors right down the hall, you might say, instead of a thousand miles away. I still, of course, didn’t have the dissertation finished by the time I passed my field exams, and with being admitted to candidacy, that would have been terribly indiscreet of me to do that, to let them know that I’d been working that much. But at the same time, it was a horrendous job of data analysis and statistical analysis, and the integrating of the library research with the filed research, and then of course the job of writing and putting all the data into tables and composing the dissertation. At this time, I was beginning to set up a plan for selling the business, and I began to look around for opportunities to join a university faculty. I found lots of people interested in me even though I was by this time forty-four or forty-five, that mid-forties range, and finally got some benefit from my business experience and my age. Most universities bidding for me offered me an Associate Professorship instead of an Assistant Professorship. That was mildly pleasing after all of that crap I had taken. Incidentally, my age meant absolutely nothing to my fellow doctoral students, aside from

expressions of surprise the first few days that some old codger was in there. We got along fine, very much of a fraternal feeling among us, and I don't think any of them ever thought of me as being an old codger.

JS: How did your graduate non-conformity affect your later teaching? Did you still retain a tendency to-

RK: Somewhere along the line in every course I teach, I try to introduce a heavy dose of skepticism. Sometimes, and in my early teaching, I made the mistake of setting up phony sets of data, to see if the students would detect them. But I found students- by and large- so trusting that it was counter-productive. Because they didn't find out themselves. It didn't occur to them to think critically, and then when they'd find out that I set them up, I had to undo that and unravel it. Then they lost some confidence in me. Instead of helping them become critical and discriminating, instead all I did was lose their confidence. So, I was forced, sadly, to change my style a little. But even so, I still try to- for instance, if I'm teaching a market research course, I make sure they understand how to lie with statistics. It's very easy to do. Then, I think in general, I usually indicate the statements in the text that I simply don't agree with, or ask questions that causes the students to question them, and to come to trust their own intuition sometimes instead of somebody else's intuition, merely because it was in print and the student's isn't. So, yes, that affects it, and my background in business affects it, too. When something is posed as a practical alternative to solving a problem, or launching a campaign, or reaching some goal, I am convinced, because of my own experience, that the approach is untenable or would lead to a disaster, I try to bring that out. But I think my business background makes me a better teacher because of the field I'm in- I'm in the business field. It might not help me at all if I were teaching philosophy. Although it might there, too. I don't know where it wouldn't help. I don't know of any place where it would be a deficit. And that's why I think if I could program everyone, if I were emperor, I would force people to take a year off between high school and college, and two years at least off between a baccalaureate and graduate programs, and maybe another two years in those cases where you get a master's degree before you get a PhD. Failing that, I would try to get students to get in co-op programs, or to get some literally "practical" experience. I don't like that word, it's not what I'm trying to get at. Neither is "real life", that's been abused. But to savor and sample life outside the classroom. Almost any kind of experience will make you a better student, less conforming to the natural, passive educational experience that our system tends to inculcate. The tutorial system in Europe- even though their university system is so undemocratic and the like that we wouldn't ever want to use it as a model- at the same time, the Oxford-Cambridge tutorial model puts extraordinary emphasis and responsibility on the student, and they're just automatically critical, and the typical American student is almost automatically uncritical, and that's a serious defect. But anyhow, as it put a... inserting a little experience outside the system into a student's life, I'm absolutely convinced it makes them a better student.

And, for me, it made me I think a better teacher, a better student, reinforcing my already intuitive notions about all of this.

JS: When you were a graduate student, how did you look upon the administration? Were they just kind of invisible to you?

RK: I didn't look on them at all. They were invisible. I remember once as a doctoral student, here I was, as I say, in my forties, and there was a general invitation posted on a bulletin board to come to have a "rap session"- I think they called it cutely back in those days- with President Fawcett at one of the graduate dorms. Remember, this was a huge campus, 55,000 students on one campus. So, I don't know what possessed me, but I decided it might be an interesting experience, so I wandered over there that evening, and found Novice Fawcett to be a very warm, engaging person, unruffled by the sharpest questions and to be kind of at ease in his position, and I came away thinking, "Yeah, he looks like an awful nice guy". But aside from that passing little phenomenon, I got to know our dean of our college pretty well, as a doctoral student, but beyond that I didn't even know who the vice-presidents were, and I was in my forties as a doctoral student. So, it doesn't surprise me or dismay me on this campus to find out that undergraduate students particularly don't have the remotest idea who I am, or are they particularly needing to know. I mean, it's just another super fluidity. So, no, I didn't know the administration at all. In any of my- I got four degrees from Ohio State University, and most people would think, "Gee, did you know so-and so or dean such-and-such, or vice-president...", but I didn't know any of them. I didn't have any interest in them. I was very much of a student activist as an undergraduate, a teacher as a graduate student- twice- but I never got to know any of them.

JS: What kind of student activism were you involved in?

RK: Well, when I say activism, this has come to connote some sort of radical or liberal cause related thing. What I meant was that I was active as a student. I was in half a dozen different... I was in a political party- a student political party- I was president of my fraternity, I was a member of the student cabinet- similar to our caucus- I was on the governing board of our student center, similar to our board here, I was an actor-member of two different acting student organizations, to put on plays and musicals and things. So, on and on and on, I was in a host of those things. I was in the student honorary, and so forth. But getting back to where we left off in the saga of dull Kegerreis, when I got my- when I finished the doctoral program, I thought about leaving Ohio. Arizona State was very much interested in me, and I visited out there and was on the verge of an appointment in their college of business as a faculty member. But both my parents became seriously ill, and I decided I couldn't leave, so I accepted a position at Ohio University. And it was a terrific struggle, but after my- at the end of my first year at Ohio U., I'd finished my dissertation, gotten it approved, and got my degree at Ohio State. In the second year at Ohio U., I became a department chairman, and during that year a couple of people at Wright

State- which I had only dimly heard of- one of whom had been a fellow doctoral student with me- Herb Brown- told me that they were looking for a dean, the second dean of the business school, and wondered if I'd be interested. Well, Dayton was my wife's hometown. On the other hand, I'd begun to sell off my business, and had left the management world in order to teach, not to be an administrator. I had "done that", in quotation marks. So, I was tempted to be a candidate for the deanship, but I was deterred by the fact that I had less than a year of academic administrative experience. It didn't look all that mysterious to me, but, I don't know, I had only a trivial amount of experience, and secondly, I was sufficiently honest to see that it represented sort of a return to management, and away from what had been the lure for me. Anyhow, I knew there wasn't any chance I'd be selected, so I decided why not find out what it's like to be a candidate for a deanship. And I had a good time being a candidate, going through interviews at Wright State, parrying the questions from skeptical faculty members and so on. It isn't modesty, it's just factual that I was astounded when I discovered that they had decided that I was the best candidate for the deanship here. It made me wonder about the quality of the school. But I had been impressed with the faculty, much more impressed than I had expected to be, and my wife and I and son were going to go to Europe that summer- a long delayed vacation- and Brage Golding called, and I had turned down their first one or two offers- I forget what they were or why, but for several reasons. He said he wanted to talk to me one last time, and I said, "I'm sorry, I'm leaving tomorrow for Europe". He said, "Well, can you meet me in Columbus?", and I said, "Well, it would be out of the way, but yeah, I guess so". So, we stopped off in Columbus and I met with him, and after an hour or so we agreed to terms, and he said he'd mail me- I gave him my European addresses- and he mailed me I think two different contracts, neither one of which ever reached me. But anyhow, I accepted the appointment, and came here in August of 1969 as dean of the business school.

JS: When you were going through the search process for the deanship-

RK: Yes?

JS: -what were the kind of things that you used as your selling points?

RK: I really didn't try to sell too much. My business background, I thought, was appropriate, it surely- being an economist for the Federal Reserve System, and along the way I was a market researcher for the Donald R.G. Cowan Agency, which at that time was pretty well known. I'd been involved in industrial development in Eastern Ohio and helped locate a quarter of a billion-dollar plant along the Ohio River; I had been engaged in residential development and had sold out a fair-sized project, eventually, to John Galbraith interest in Columbus- again, the name registered, in Ohio at least. In addition to retailing and so on. So, I thought that I lacked academic experience, but I brought much more business experience than I expected other candidates to bring. And this was about the time when it began to be a minor fad to have businessmen-

business executives, Chairmen of the Board of Ford or people like that- to come and be head of business schools, with no academic experience at all. Only about half of those experiences worked out, by the way. But nevertheless, there was just sort of a minor little wave on interest there in maybe tinkering with the idea of business executives on faculties, and business executives in business schools and so forth. So, I suppose if I represented anything... I don't think I really tried to convince them that I was the guy. It may have been somewhat disconcerting; I may have asked more questions than most candidates do... about their ambitions. For instance, I asked them if they were seriously interested in becoming accredited. If the answer had been no, I would not have accepted. It'd be a no, no matter how attractive otherwise. And as I recall, my little informal survey, it was more of them- the majority wanted to be accredited, but I could see some hesitancy on the part of a handful of people. So, it was pretty much of a give and take, as I recall. You have to remember, that was fifteen years ago. There are still people over there who were involved in that search who may question their own judgement by now.

JS: So, you became a full professor of Marketing, and came here as dean.

RK: Yeah. Mm hmm.

JS: How much teaching did you do?

RK: As dean, I taught, as I recall... a couple of courses a year. Maybe two or three. I was dean only two years, of course. But I taught- I was a full, participating member of the faculty. In the sense of an administrator, I taught more than any other dean on the campus did, I'm pretty sure. Then, after two years I became Vice-President for Administration, and then I taught about once a year, a frequency I was determined to retain when I became President, but failed. I taught maybe once every 1.2 years.

JS: Who were some of your fellow deans?

RK: When I first arrived here, Bob Conley was the Dean of the College of Science and Engineering- he's now President of the University Without Walls in Cincinnati. Norwood Marquis, who has since died, was the Dean of the College of Education, and Bill Baker, I believe, was either Dean of Liberal Arts or just becoming Dean of Liberal Arts. He's still on the English faculty. Bob Milheim was Graduate Dean. He, regrettably, has died also. Both he and Norwood Marquis were from Miami [University], and they both died of heart attacks at about the same age. Not at the same time, but at about the same age. And that's all the deans we had. We didn't have a School of Nursing, or Medicine, or Professional Psychology, or Continuing Education, or a Branch Campus.

JS: You moved up to the Vice-President-

RK: Mm hmm.

JS: -for Administration at Wright State? Under Dr. Golding?

RK: Uh huh. Yeah.

JS: Why did you make that particular move after only being dean for two years?

RK: Uh... I think it was mainly curiosity, and probably ego. Here I was becoming almost a whiz kid; I'd been a chairman one year, a dean two years, and after three years total experience in higher education, I was being offered the Vice-Presidency at a state university. For one thing, I believed the university needed one. We didn't have one- a Vice-President for Administration- and we really needed one. We needed someone to shape up our investments program, and a lot of other things, and I was probably the chief complainer about inadequacies in that field, and maybe I got what I deserved. You know, the guy who complains the most at a meeting always gets the assignment to clean up the mess. I don't know, I think it was ego. I got quite a sales talk from Brage Golding about why I should do this, and why the university needed me and all that stuff. I think it may have been-

JS: He sounds like a very good salesman.

RK: Yeah. I think it may have been a mistake. Because it represented a final, incontrovertible leap into one-hundred percent administration. When you're a dean, you can pass for a respectable faculty member, just barely, and by that time the faculty itself has written you off. If you were an eminent scholar one day, and a dean the next, your regard and your assumptions about being a scholar evaporate.

JS: Why is that?

RK: It's magical. It's mysterious and magical. You walk over the line into- not, as some people would say, to the enemy camp, it isn't for most people quite that colorful a transition. But it's just that faculty have the experience of knowing that the burdens of the administrative side of your life become so overwhelming, that you no longer can do any respectable research, you don't have time for writing, you really don't have time for reading. So, you begin to degrade as a pure professional, because you can't even talk about the current literature respectably, you aren't doing research, and you aren't writing and you aren't teaching much- they all know that. The brand new dean or the brand new vice-president is still resisting all that automatic re-labeling, because he or she knows that: "I'll find time"; "teaching means so much to me"; "research means

so much to me”; “keeping up the regard that my peers have for me means so much to me”, and so forth and so forth. Because of my dissertation being based on the hot topic of the day, I got a lot of publications in the subsequent three years. So even after I came to Wright State, I was still publishing, so that made me look better than I really was. But that had all dwindled and disappeared, and just as the critics believe, when I became Vice-President for Administration, I couldn’t even keep up the pretense of being a legitimate scholar in my field any longer.

JS: What was the administration then, as compared to the administration now?

RK: Well, we had just two people besides the president. No, we had three, I beg your pardon. I think it was somewhat similar, we had a provost- the first provost Wright State ever had died of a heart attack after six weeks on duty.

JS: Who was that?

RK: You asked me too quickly, I can’t remember his name... umm... Thomas, his name was Bruce Thomas. And interestingly, his widow married Fred White, years later, when Fred White’s wife died. Ann White. Anyhow, the first provost died, and Andy Spiegel was either provost or academic vice-president, I can’t remember which title he had when he first held that office. And then we had the first Vice-President for Student Affairs, who was Ed Pollack. And I was the first Vice-President for Administration. So, that was the core group. Superficially, not much different from what we have today, except that in my administrative structure, the Vice-President for Student Affairs and the Vice-President for Administration both report to the Provost, whereas in the Golding era and for a few years in my administration, we experimented with the two major different academic administrative structures, one of which has the Provost as an executive vice-president, which is what we have now, and the other has the more traditional, more horizontal form in which you have an academic vice-president, an administrative vice-president, a student vice-president, and usually one other. So, it’s not too different, in outline. The areas have become much bigger, and more easily identified, I suppose. Sharper. More sharply defined. So, Vice-President for Administration for two years, and in my second year as Vice-President for Administration, Brage Golding made his decision to leave. He had been President for five years. So, the announcement didn’t leave enough time to conduct a full-fledged search to install a new President for the forthcoming academic year, and the result was that Fred White became Acting President.

JS: What position had he been holding down?

RK: He had been... I believe he was Vice-President for Development. Fred’s title through most of his early days with Wright State- and he, as you recall, was Wright State’s first employee- he was simply called “Business Manager”, and... [to James] are you exhausted?

[short break in recording]

JS: He was-

RK: Fred started out his Wright State career as Business manager, which meant that he did everything, and when Brage Golding was hired as Vice-President, [laughs] Brage Golding took over the general management, and Fred White then began to concentrate completely on the business affairs of the university, and this was before my time.

JS: Brage Golding was hired as Vice-President?

RK: He was hired as Vice-President of Ohio State and Vice-President of Miami, because at the time Brage Golding was hired, this was a “special campus”, not a branch campus. It was the Dayton Campus of both Miami and Ohio State. It was an absolute creation of necessity to describe what was really an interim arrangement, and they really didn’t know what to call it. So, they didn’t use the word “branch campus”, although most people around here used that as a kind of a shorthand. So, Brage Golding was not president until... 1969? ’69, is that right? I think so. He was Vice-President of these two other universities, and running the Dayton Campus, for a year and a half or so. So, I don’t know, maybe he was only president literally for about three years. Three and a half or so. Anyhow, during early in my second year as Vice-President of Administration, Brage decided to leave, and he became President of San Diego State University, and there really, as I say, wasn’t time to do a traditional search, so Fred White was made Acting President, and a national search ensued. Early in that search, some people asked me if I was going to be a candidate, and I said, “No, no, I couldn’t be a candidate, in all seriousness, because I’ve only been in academic administration for three or four years, and Wright State needs an experienced president”, and so forth and so forth, and I didn’t think so. As I saw the candidates that were attracted in the search and who began to bubble up, though, I began to think, “Gosh, maybe I should be a candidate”. So, in that kind of period- I don’t know how early in the search it was- but I decided to become sort of a passive candidate, so that there would be a local hurdle for external candidates to jump over, at least. Sort of a... I hesitate to use the word “standard”, but at least something of a set of criteria at least that against which you could compare outside candidates. So, without much excitement or fanfare, I became a candidate. And there was a magnificently representative search committee involved in this-

JS: What was the committee composed of?

RK: As I recall, it was thirteen or fourteen people. Every constituency I think that could be identified had a member on the search committee. And I became a finalist in that group, and had a great time going around and being interviewed and all that sort of thing, while of course working full-time right on the campus. Here, again, like the other searches, there was not a

search for Vice-President for Administration, so I'd been in only one search up to that time, and that was for the deanship. And when I was made Chairman at Ohio U., there was no search, [laughs] so the dean said- and there were no women in the department, "Kegerreis, the guys in your department want you to be chairman", and I said, "I don't want to be the chairman", and he says, "Well, no one else wants to be chairman, either, and you're the least senior with the appropriate rank, so you've got to be chairman". "But I don't want to be chairman", "Well, try it", "Okay, well, I'll take it for a year, but if after a year...". So, you know, we went through that kind of dance, so that wasn't much of a search. The deanship search wasn't on the scale of the presidential search, so anyhow, I was mildly surprised to some degree. I don't suffer from lack of ego, but even so it was a mild surprise that I was in the final group, and a really stunning event when they decided to select me as president. There was some disagreement about that on the search committee, and not a unanimous recommendation of the search committee at all. Some people even say that I was not the first choice. I've taken great pains not to investigate that, because these people on the search committee were all colleagues and associates that I would have to deal with afterwards, and that's very... dysfunctional, to try to sort out who wanted you and who didn't want you. So, anyhow, let me just say that it was not anything like a unanimous agreement on the part of the search committee. As I understand it, it was unanimous on the part of the Trustees, with whom I had had relatively little contact. I made presentations to them on financial and business matters of the university and other related matters regularly at their meetings, and because of my activities in town I got to see some of them once in a while. But I certainly wasn't intimately connected with them. That was another surprise, so I finally found myself in a situation where the family said to me, 'You fraud, you. You left business to go into academic life, so that, one, you could return to your real love, which is teaching, you'd get new fulfillment, launch your final career in more satisfying circumstances, see more of your family, we'd be able to travel, which we all love to do, and instead you're back in management again for half the income and twice the aggravation'. So, I don't know, maybe they were right.

JS: Why did you want to be president, and what points did you make with the search committee to convince them that you wanted to be president?

RK: I... it's a... in a process, it's always difficult to pick out where different decision variables emerge and consolidate into what is, well, from that point on I wanted to be president. I don't know that I never didn't want to be president, it was just that in the early stages, I didn't think I would be considered seriously, and no one likes to be in a contest where they aren't a serious candidate. I was watching the New York Marathon yesterday. If I entered the New York Marathon, nobody would give me a second glance and they'd have every right not to. So, there was some modesty there, based on what I thought were practical factors. But as I say, I began to hear about some of the candidates that were showing up and presumably were being taken seriously, and I thought, 'Geez, I can do a better job than that guy, I know him from so and so', or her, or had heard about them. So, stage two of this process- and, you know, sliding along here,

not nice, crisp decision points- stage two was, 'Maybe I better get in this thing, so that people can...', and I gave you that thing before. Hard to really set that out in crisp, clear terms. But I- in a sense- wanted to be sure that Wright State got what I thought the next president ought to do and be, and in my interviews, I was kind of trying to coach the search committee as much as I was trying selling myself. They'd ask me what I thought we needed in a new president, and I would tell them, because I believed that what we needed was someone that was more community oriented, who would re-establish and consolidate the base of support that we had, and start integrating some of the academic programs with the community in a more stylized, understandable way. In other words, there were some very specific things I thought the new president ought to be and ought to do. But the third phase was, I guess you might say, when the group of finalists became revealed. I honestly thought that I could do as good or better job than any of those, even though some of them had had more illustrious careers in academe. At least one of them did. It was at that time that I thought, well, if this is the group from which someone is going to be chosen, I think I can do as good a job as anybody for Wright State. I had become fascinated with and loyal to Wright State by that time, even though I'd only been here three and a half years or so. I could see that, boy, the things that were going to happen here at Wright State were going to be much more exciting than those that were going to happen at a typical university like Miami or Ohio U., from which I'd come, or even Ohio State. So, if I had not been selected, well, I would have stayed, gladly. It wasn't a make or break situation, and I was fully prepared to continue to be Vice-President for Administration indefinitely, assuming the new president had wanted to keep me. That's always a danger in becoming a candidate, you know. If you're still around, particularly in a high position, when the new president is selected, he may decide that you've got too much baggage to cope with, he might ask you to leave. Or she. There were no she's in the final group. If he had done that, I of course would have left. I was very marketable, and mobile. I would have, I think, been as graceful as anybody about leaving.

JS: Were you, therefore... you waited to put your candidacy until after the final group had been announced?

RK: Oh, no, no, no. I didn't wait that long. It was just- and here again, memory fails me in terms of how long it was from the start of the search to the point where I became a serious candidate, but it was well ahead of the final selection. I didn't wait coyly in the shadows to be argued into the candidacy. But I did not take it seriously in the start of it. First of all, I had my hands full here, with the previous president already gone, and the search didn't commence for quite a while after he left. He literally left. I had my hands full, because my duties increased significantly with his literal, physical departure. I don't want to go into all the reasons why that happened, just take my word for it, I was busy. That may have been another factor in why I was taken seriously, as it became obvious that I was working very hard and had a lot to do with the campus. I don't know, maybe.

JS: What were the reactions of some of your colleagues that you said were on the search committee to you becoming a candidate?

RK: Um, favorable. My former deans- colleagues, for example- were enthusiastic about it. That may have been the tipping factor.

JS: Do you think being an inside candidate was an advantage?

RK: It was for me. That's not always the case, though. I think the assumption on the part of the campus community when that search began was that we'd have an outside candidate, I mean, that we'd pick an outside person, and that was mine, too. But since you brought that up, that reminds me, that's another reason I didn't take myself all that seriously, because this young university and everything probably would go with another outside president. But it's kind of hard to reconstruct all those ways of thinking about things. And it's hard to convince people that your first interest in becoming a candidate was simply to provide a comparison, a base of comparison. That sounds a little bit too... I don't know what.

JS: Too pat?

RK: Too pat. Too modest, in a way. But this was a growing thing. The farther the search went on, the more interested I became, the more convinced that I was competitive and that I could do a good job. And although I had become acquainted with lots of other universities by that time, and other presidents, and other senior administrators, I really didn't have that big an experiential base of comparison of myself with them. As I say, I've never been plagued with an inadequate ego. I've always thought I could do almost anything I was dedicated to doing. But there is a certain aura or sense about academic administration that has been carefully crafted over centuries that makes an outsider to that system a little bit humble or self-conscious. So, at that point, I was not yet sufficiently acquainted with all the potential peers that I might have to realize that it isn't that overwhelming, the quality of the competitors. Anyhow, there was a process that I went through personally, and that I think the campus went through, in thinking about me. These two different transformational processes were going on at the same time, and not necessarily in synchronization. So that by the time the final decision was made, the trustees had come to the conclusion that they would pick me, some people on the campus had not come to that conclusion, and I had started probably behind both groups. So, there were different threads going along here. By the time the choice was made, I was ready, and hopeful, but not at all- in quotation marks- "counting on it", or anything like that, so-

JS: How about... how much degree of importance did the Board of Trustees give to the search committees? Now, the search committee process had you meet with the Board of Trustees, of course.

RK: Yes.

JS: So, was the search committee's advocacy of one candidate over another- was that the major factor in the Board of Trustees's decision?

RK: I really don't know. I literally did not ask, thinking it not politically wise to probe into the process that much. I have heard- had heard, at that time- that there was disagreement, and confusing and contradictory advice, some back and forth meetings and arguments and so on, but I don't... I'm sure that the Board of Trustees took the advisory search committee very seriously. But I don't know how big a deal that this was at that time. I can tell you that I had absolutely no trouble; no one pouted or wrote long "letters to the editor" about the terrible mistake that had been made. When you have a reasonable situation with which to deal, and you're going to have to work with the people who are involved, and you have to work for nine other people who are involved, it didn't seem to me to be at all productive to discover exactly who or what group or the identities of the different constituencies that may have been lined up on one side or the other, or were all the constituencies mixed, or how much weight, as you put it, did the trustees give to the search committee. Because the search committee was not consolidated- as I recall- nice and neatly, like the situation at Bowling Green, where the advisory search committee recommended Mick Ferrari unequivocally, and the trustees chose an outside candidate unequivocally. It was nothing as neatly constructed as that.

JS: How would you describe the composition of the Board of Trustees at that time? What kind of individuals were on the board?

RK: It was rather elegant. When I say elegant, I mean the people were still from the era from which the university was being formulated, and still backed by- in quotation marks- "the establishment". So, you had Bob Oelman, who at the time was Chairman of the Board of NCR and Chief Executive of NCR, who was Chairman of the Board of Trustees; you had Harry Jeffrey, who at that time fifteen years ago was still youthful, in a sense, and very dynamic, and a very prominent and respected attorney in town; you had... oh, not equivalents to those, but you had John Keto, who was very recently retired as chief scientist of one of the major labs at the Air Force base. So, it was an interesting board. You had Bud Crowl, chief executive of a couple of radio stations in town. It was... interesting. Helen James, who later became a member of the Board of Regents. Ray Ross, who was a district director of the United Auto Workers. Um... I'm trying to remember some of the other characters. Each one of the board members in those days seemed to me to be... a person who was sufficiently distinctive that they registered on you with a clear-cut impact and image. Just to name one little interaction there, Bob Oelman and Ray Ross had- as heads of their respective organizations- waged a terribly bitter battle in Dayton about the organization of NCR, and the outside commentator would have expected them to be at each

other's throats; and Harry Jeffrey was an Arch-Republican- a one-time Republican Congressman from this area- and yet I got Harry Jeffrey and Ray Ross to author jointly the first labor recognition policy of any Board of Trustees of any state university in Ohio. And Bob Oelman, the supposed arch enemy of Ray Ross, worked very smoothly with Ray on the board, harmoniously. So, it was an interesting board, and I don't want to say anything qualitative about it, except that it was very impressive. Since that time I have known a lot of boards of a lot of different organizations, and I would say that it was one of the most impressive that I've ever seen. Nobody was frivolous about their unpaid assignment.

JS: Well, thank you very much for this first interview. I've taken up quite a bit of your time this first time.

RK: It's okay.