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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: 7/25/2013

Interviewer: Lewis Shupe
Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Communication, WSU

Interviewee: Dr. Craig Willis
President Emeritus, Lock Haven University

Lewis Shupe: This is Lew Shupe, Professor Emeritus from the Department of Communication at Wright State University. Today is July 25, 2013, and I have the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Craig Willis, President Emeritus of Lock Haven University, Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, and we will be learning about his past history here at Wright State. I'll call you Craig, may I?

Craig Willis: Fine.

LS: Okay.

CW: That'll work.

LS: It's a pleasure to have you back on campus.

CW: It's good to see you again, Lew. It's been years.

LS: One of the first things I would like to do is to have you give us your brief history and how you came to Wright State.

CW: Okay. I'm originally from Cambridge, Ohio, I went to Ohio Wesleyan University and did my graduate degrees, including Ph.D., at Ohio State. I taught in the Columbus Public Schools for a year, I trained to be an English and business teacher but during that year, toward the end of that year I was asked to return to Ohio Wesleyan to work there, so I worked there for eleven years starting in admissions, I eventually became Registrar, I was also international student advisor, advised students who were doing Study Abroad, handled foreign student admissions and foreign students who came and so on. A broad variety of things there, but I was Registrar there when in 1969 a friend from college called me and asked me to come to the Dayton Public Schools. This was the last job I got before search committees, he could just appoint someone. I didn't think I wanted to but it was an enormous salary increase and so I came and worked at the Dayton Public Schools in personnel, trouble shooter, teacher in-service, for a year. My wife and I both really missed the college campus atmosphere, which we had been in for years in Delaware,

Ohio. As it happened, an opening occurred for a director of admissions at Wright State. I should say, too, that in the meantime the Board of Education at Dayton, through an election, had turned kind of a complete turnaround in their attitude toward in-service education for teachers and resources for that. So I applied and got the job. Jim Dotson was the chair of the search committee, a former library director by the way, so I came as Director of Admissions, enjoyed it, had a lot of experience in that kind of work, and that year, the year that I came, the freshman class grew by 30%-

LS: What year was that?

CW: That was 1969. It was growing by leaps and bounds. And during that year I was courted by the University of Kentucky to take a position there and I was considering it. But the president, Brage Golding, at the time said, 'Craig, we want you to stay, we're starting this new University Division and we would like for you to be the dean', and a salary increase and so of course I said yes. This was because he came from Purdue and they had a model where all students were admitted to a freshman, sophomore, or underclass college and then applied to get into engineering or business or arts and sciences or whatever, and that was the model that he wanted. So, is that enough about my background up to Wright State?

LS: You know, we are doing these interviews as a part of the oral history, the beginning of Wright State, and your name keeps popping up, because you wore many hats when you were here.

CW: Well, just Director of Admissions and the dean of the University Division.

LS: Your first one was?

CW: Director of Admissions.

LS: Director of Admissions.

CW: And I kept doing that for the first two years after the University Division started as we were building it and it was growing. Of course I was on committees and other things, many things, but those were the two jobs. And the most important thing about the University Division was that Brage Golding left. [Laughs]

LS: What do you mean by that?

CW: Well, it was his baby and he took the job at University of California at San Diego, and then Kent State before he retired, and President Kegerreis, the new president, wasn't as interested in this model because in the colleges they wanted to get their students as fast as possible and have their own advisors, in whether it be business or education or whatever. So, it kept going and I enjoyed it, we had about 25 people, the people who advised the students, and I advised some of them myself, and I always taught courses in

the College of Education as well, one a quarter. We also had all of the remedial services. Ann Shearer, do you remember her?

LS: Yeah.

CW: She was, I appointed her assistant dean and she worked with those kind of programs, English as a foreign language. But Golding's idea had been to have freshman English and the basic math courses in that division also, but that never happened because those departments didn't want that to happen, and I don't blame them, so it remained essentially a function of advising until the student was admitted to a college, and remedial activities for students that needed that kind of help.

LS: But you continued with admissions.

CW: For two years.

LS: For two years.

CW: It was supposed to be for one but they had a failed search. So the idea was never to do that in perpetuity.

LS: Okay. Who was the admissions director before you?

CW: His name was Dewitt Hardy.

LS: Dewitt Hardy.

CW: Yes, and he retired and I came.

LS: And then the actual title, I've heard two or three names of that first division. University College-

CW: -and University Division, and again, Golding's plan was to re-name the divisions [as] colleges, which they did, but the University Division remained a division and the Graduate Division, which was hoping to become the Graduate College, remained a division. So, the whole time I did it it was University Division.

LS: Oh, okay.

CW: I met with the other deans, I think there were eleven of us in the meetings-

LS: Some of whom were?

CW: By name you mean?

LS: Mm hmm.

CW: Eugene Cantelupe in arts and sciences, one of my mentors and role models, Frank Jankowski in engineering, Norwood Marquis and then Roger Iddings in education, John Murray in business, and then he became provost himself, and I can't think who replaced him now-

LS: Oh, that's okay. I just thought it would be interesting to tie you in with some of the early-

CW: -Brian Hutchings in science and engineering.

LS: Oh, mm hmm. Good. Where was your office?

CW: It started in Millett but moved very quickly to the- how many floors does Allyn have?

LS: Four.

CW: Okay, fourth floor of Allyn. We were next to the music department at that time.

LS: Interestingly, Allyn Hall, everyone was in Allyn Hall.

CW: Well, it was the first building and so everything was there, and then moved away.

LS: All the people were there. Being that we are doing this interview in the library, where was the library at that time?

CW: It had just moved from Allyn to Millett, but while I was here this building opened.

LS: In Millett, was that in the basement, the library?

CW: I think so. I wouldn't want to swear on a Bible.

LS: Okay. But that's just a point of information, being that we're sitting here in the library today. What was your impression when you came out and you saw a one building campus?

CW: Well, no, by the time I came, it was '64 it was Allyn, but when I came there was Allyn and Millett-

LS: Oh.

CW: -and another one. What else is in that quadrangle?

LS: I can't help you. Oelman?

CW: What?

LS: Oelman.

CW: Yes, Oelman. So, I thought it was tremendously exciting. The place was new, it was growing, full of ideas, and I had been at a private college where selective admissions were used and a number of students weren't admitted. As a matter of fact, one year some students were admitted by mistake, and they were followed, there were 22 of them, and 21 graduated with good grades. But I kind of became disillusioned with just going on the SAT scores. That was the criteria there, and then high school, but mainly SAT scores. So it was exciting to be at a place where everyone could get a try, practically everyone, and then I was working in a unit where we were trying to help them, you know, we helped them with their schedules but they were encouraged to come in anytime, and a number did. Part of the group that I personally advised- I didn't have a normal caseload because I had other things to do- but I advised all the athletes and it was interesting to watch their development because I come from music and theater, but people from those kind of activities are more driven-

LS: What do you mean they're more driven?

CW: They wanted to succeed in their sport or theater or whatever, but to succeed they also have to be successful students, and for some of them that was quite a challenge. So I mean driven in the sense of, 'I've really got to succeed here'. A lot of students were much more marginal, they weren't sure why they were here and if they missed a car payment or something they might have to withdraw. At a commuter school we have a lot more of that.

LS: Who was your liaison person in athletics?

CW: Don Mohr, the athletic director.

LS: Don Mohr. We've interviewed him.

CW: Is he still alive?

LS: Yes.

CW: Quite a guy.

LS: He is.

CW: I really liked him.

LS: You made an allusion toward the quality of some of the students. Could you take that a little bit further?

CW: Um...

LS: You mentioned car payments and-

CW: Right. Wright State started to serve the needs of the state. It had, as you probably know, there had been a branch campus of Ohio State and Miami, and Governor Rhodes said if the two together reach an enrollment of 5000 I'll create a new state university, and they did and he did follow through on that. It was exciting because everyone had a chance, but many weren't ready for that opportunity, or they might have thought they were ready and they weren't, they might have been ready and their economic situation was such that they had to work too much and didn't have time to study. So it was exciting to work with those students and see how many we could- I don't want to say save, that's too strong a word- but make successful in their collegiate careers, and usually if they got going, a year or two in they could see how to finish. But most of the students were first generation students and so they didn't have parental models of collegiate success, so-

LS: Did you get discouraged at all with the quality of the students?

CW: Yes and no. More discouraged with the students, and I don't mean any particular students, but almost any student of average ability can get through a university if they know the right courses and have an idea what they're going to do. Many flounder because they have no idea what they want to do, as you know. So, no, I'm a very optimistic person and I don't get discouraged much.

LS: What was your first big challenge as dean?

CW: Working with the staff. Because the former dean of arts and sciences, and I'm sorry I'm drawing a blank on his name, Cantelupe's predecessor- there's a note there for you- had been forced out and given this job [University Division dean] as a way for him to still have a job, and he hired the staff and then I don't know what he did, but he was let go and that's when I was offered the job. So, the staff couldn't understand why he had left and were somewhat hostile. Here's this person who was thrust upon us, so that was the biggest challenge, working with them, and I became lifelong friends with most of them, it worked out, but that was the challenge. The other was getting organized. It was a big undertaking to be advising several thousand students, and the filing systems and the retrieval of what you needed when you needed it. That was something to get organized.

LS: In retrospect, was the university division model a success here?

CW: I think it was, although I have to say I don't know that it was absolutely necessary. Most colleges that don't have one put undecided students in arts and sciences or arts and humanities and they move out from there into education, business, nursing, engineering and so on. But overall I would say yes, it gave students people that cared about them to work with and talk with, and the advisors themselves had to make sure they were... in some cases they could be spending all their time with three or four kids who, you know,

wanted to come in all the time, and so part of their [or] our responsibility was in some cases we needed to get them to counseling or other services, and so we tried to do that.

LS: Well, this was a big job, instituting this whole new concept. I would think that you would get some resistance, thinking that you were invading territories.

CW: Oh, absolutely. Some of the other deans were very open, especially after Golding left and they saw that President Kegerreis wasn't as- after Golding left, for a year there was an interim president, Fred White, who had been the administrative vice-president, a wonderful guy, so that things continued normally. But when Kegerreis came and they would go to him and say, 'Why do we need this? Let us just advise them ourselves. We want these engineering students. We don't want anybody else messing with them'. Meanwhile, we were always meeting with these different colleges and we had different advisors specialized in different colleges and worked with those people all the time. Of course students said they knew what [degree/program] they wanted. Over half didn't and so we just dealt with them without knowing.

LS: How did you deal with them?

CW: The undecided ones?

LS: Yes.

CW: We tried to make them aware of the opportunities of what the different colleges had to offer, what their interests were, we got them to the testing center to try to measure their interests better. Like, if you were talking to a kid and he or she has not taken math or science much, they were out of several things. You know, just being realistic with them and working with them. But if I can, going back to the resistance, it was-

LS: I'm not asking you to name names. But it's an interesting point of information.

CW: Oh, no, but it was kind of like congress, where hopefully, it doesn't always work this way, but people will try to disagree without being disagreeable. So I had nice personal relationships with these other deans, and that helped a lot, no matter what they thought or I thought. Society is forged in its best times by goodwill and friendship and friendliness, so we had a lot of that.

LS: Now tell me again, how long were you in the deanship?

CW: 1971-77, six years.

LS: Oh, okay. So you had a good tenure.

CW: It launched me into becoming a provost and a president, so it was in retrospect a wonderful thing, because I enjoyed both of those roles. When I left they downgraded it

from a dean to a director. Bill Collie from the Department of Education was named the director. I'm not sure if it exists now, frankly-

LS: So he took over from you.

CW: Yes.

LS: Okay. What was your biggest success?

CW: At Wright State?

LS: In that position. And then I'm going to ask you what was your thing that made you the most sad. Is that too difficult?

CW: No. The biggest success was getting a new thing underway, winning the confidence of the staff and having them/us all work together successfully. They seemed really sad when I left, and as I said many of them still keep in contact. So that was the biggest success. And at the same time I was still running admissions, which was a big operation because enrollment was expanding so rapidly, and I was glad to have that removed. That and the relationships with the students, again, some of them are still in contact.

LS: Well, you were really probably the first person that many of the students had contact with, right?

CW: Our division. I certainly didn't have contact with all of them myself, but yeah. Some of them, many of them had been through orientation, but the first thing was to come and work up a schedule and then get started.

LS: If you could go back, what is one thing you would like to have changed?

CW: Well, it would have been interesting if Brage Golding's model would have been given a chance to work. He saw- and I assume Purdue did this, I mean he had to get the idea someplace- when advisors plus teachers of freshman English and beginning math, the two skills that you need to succeed to do anything else, all work together he thought there would be important interactions and synergy from that. That, of course, didn't happen. Had it happened, that would have been interesting to see. But, did I answer the question? Or did I waver off.

LS: If you could go back and maybe change something.

CW: Yeah, it would have been interesting to see. In talking with him in later years, he laughed and said he wasn't sure that it would have worked himself. I mean the freshman math and freshman English, but he thought it was going to be worth a try. I said, 'Well, did you get it accomplished at San Diego or Kent State?', and he said "No". Quite a guy.

LS: Was Warner House still in existence when you were here?

CW: The old farm house?

LS: Uh huh, the old farm house. You never had anything to do with Warner House, right?

CW: No, I didn't personally. I think Human Resources might have been there when I was there, I remember going there to sign papers.

LS: Oh, did you?

CW: Mm hmm.

LS: Does the fish bowl concept of how the secretaries worked ring a bell with you?

CW: Um, I think I know what you mean, but no, I don't recall that being talked about.

LS: How were the facilities when you were here, you know, in secretarial help and staff help?

CW: Well, I'm most familiar with the Admissions Office, Registrar's Office and University Division, and the secretaries- it was all a case of more than that, it was secretaries and clerks, you know, and they were all kind of together, is that what you mean by fishbowl?

LS: Mm hmm, yeah.

CW: In some fishbowl scenarios it is secretaries from a lot of different places all together and people bring them work, but I didn't have any experience with that. All of ours were focused on admissions, or-

LS: Who were some of the staff with whom you worked closely at that time?

CW: Well, I mentioned the deans, and my boss at first was Andy Spiegel, and then John Murray, so I obviously worked closely with them. The staff of the University Division, the 17 or 18 advisors, do you want their names?

LS: No, just I know sometimes there were certain people that kind of were a big help to you, in the staff.

CW: Okay, well, I mentioned Gene Cantelupe, I especially admired his style and used it myself in my later- in this post here but later as well.

LS: Did you ever know Verna Graves?

CW: No, what did she do?

LS: She was one of the very first secretarial people here and she did all kinds of jobs. But I'm just curious about that.

CW: No, I don't know if she was still working when I was here, I knew a lot of the secretaries.

LS: How did you- you had your own secretaries, right?

CW: Right.

LS: Okay. So you functioned as an autonomous group.

CW: Yes.

LS: Good. Okay. You mentioned Dean Cantelupe several times. I worked with him in the College of Liberal Arts. What a marvelous person.

CW: Yes.

LS: A renaissance scholar.

CW: I had him at Concord and Lockhaven [Universities] as a guest speaker.

LS: Oh, you did?

CW: Mm hmm. And his wife Jean, you probably knew her as well. Gene and Jean.

LS: What was it about Gene that you really admired?

CW: Well, on a one to one basis he was just really friendly and helpful and facilitative. In a meeting, he didn't talk a lot but when he did he had something to say, and I don't think he had a doctorate in communications like you do, but he had the secret or trick of starting out softly and slowly, you had to really listen, and then when he was ready to make a point, [BANGS his fist on the table], it was thunderous.

LS: [Laughing]. What you said, would you explain that.

CW: [Laughing] Well, when he had everybody's attention-

LS: Yeah, I knew him well.

CW: You had to listen carefully, and when he came to a point- and his point usually was that arts and sciences was an underdog compared to all the others and it supported the rest by having larger classes and yet got the least resources- so he made that point when it was important. But he was very friendly with everybody as well with that. But, just effective. But sometimes- he and Andy Speigel had known each other before and I think

Spiegel was interested in bringing him here because I believe Spiegel was a historian himself and had some feel for the liberal arts college. But sometimes his points made a difference. He knew when to speak.

LS: Were you ever discouraged with the facilities here?

CW: Never.

LS: Never?

CW: No.

LS: Okay.

CW: But before we moved we were in an inner sanctum in Millett with no windows, within three or four months of my taking the job we moved to Allyn, on the corner, in the corner.

LS: Right in the corner.

CW: The Admissions Office was kind of a dismal place, in the first floor of Allyn.

LS: What do you mean by dismal?

CW: No windows, crowded. But I know they eventually moved. They needed to. Because a lot of students didn't coming in. Like, if you're going far away, you go visit. Students either just came on their own or didn't visit, but that changed and they got better facilities. But no, and again it was the newness of everything that was exciting. While I was here, though, the library opened, the arts building opened. When I first came, we went to plays in a church basement. Before your time, I guess.

LS: No. Tell me about that.

CW: It was right near campus and they had an agreement with this church to use it for their plays.

LS: Now that's over near Zink Rd., isn't it?

CW: I believe. Keep in mind I've been gone for 34 years.

LS: But that didn't discourage you, right? That you didn't have the lush facilities that many other places had.

CW: Well, no. Because they were building them as fast as they could, and the enrollments of course were going up and supporting that so it was basically all happy.

LS: What's your impression now being back on campus?

CW: Well, it's the first time I've been back in probably ten years, I've been here a few times over the years. But the entrance looked totally different, and of course a number of new buildings. My friend, Bob Wagley, talks about the old gym. I remember when it was built, now it's a gymnasium and they have, what, the Nutter Center?

LS: The Nutter Center.

CW: Where they have athletic events.

LS: So when you were here, the gym was the active place, right?

CW: Yes, it was. That's where the basketball was played, and the swimming pool, there was a pool there.

LS: Did you have any interaction or much interaction with Disability Services?

CW: Uh, yes. The lady in charge did not report to the University Division, she reported to Student Life. But yes, we worked very closely together.

LS: Was that Patty Marks?

CW: Yes, and I know our advisors even went to other places to advise students that had trouble with us. I mean, we had an elevator and wheelchairs and accessible doors, but there were some reasons occasionally for them to go. We were aware, and again I remember Governor Rhodes saying this, I wasn't here, but he said since this campus was going to be built from scratch it needed to be totally handicapped accessible, including the tunnel. I know we had workshops that we sponsored for faculty, working with Patty, about the different handicaps, because some professor might have every handicapped student in the front row. Well, it didn't make any difference to a blind student whether he or she was in the front row or not. And just little things like that. [Cell phone ringing] Excuse me. I will turn it off if I can get it out.

LS: This is a sign of the times.

CW: How do you like my ring, it's the Hallelujah Chorus. [Laughs]

LS: That's okay. This will make a delightful part of the interview. Did you get it turned off? Is it important?

CW: I'm trying to see. No, I can call back.

LS: The reason I wanted to ask about Disability Services is that you met many of the students who needed those services for the first time, and so in a sense you were instrumental, weren't you, in getting those [students] to feel welcome?

CW: Yeah, we did our best. Patty was their first and most important point of contact and she gave workshops for us. For instance, I know she considered the deaf the hardest to work with among the various disabilities and [she] helped all of us see how to help them better, and so we weren't, I would say, the first point of contact but we worked with them and enjoyed that. For many of us we hadn't had much contact with handicapped students of any kind. I had, at Ohio Wesleyan. But it was a good experience.

LS: When you left, when you were getting ready to leave, what were some of the main changes that were happening here on campus?

CW: Um, the College of Medicine was just getting underway, that had virtually no impact on the University Division. I was on the search committee for the medical school dean. And nursing had gotten underway, two or three years before, but mainly it was continuing to adapt to the growing population, and the Provost was like a father with too many children at his table, and they all needed food and he was trying to make everyone happy, including the University Division at that time. But other than that I am not aware of any big changes.

LS: Was it difficult for you to leave?

CW: Yes, it was. We loved it here. My wife in particular was apprehensive about going to West Virginia but that turned out to be a wonderful move. I was 47, and I felt like I didn't know how long the University Division was going to last.

LS: Oh, you thought it was going to-

CW: -Well, I frankly talked to President Kegerreis about it, and he admitted that he probably wouldn't have formed it in the first place; that he didn't particularly want to kill it but it wasn't high on his priority list. But he assured me if they did something with it I could remain teaching in the College of Education. I taught, as I said, there almost every quarter and loved it. So I thought it's time to look around, so I did and something happened very quickly. They had a wonderful party for me, both the staff on the one hand and President Kegerreis and the deans etc. on the other hand. But we loved this area, would have been happy to stay but it was time for me to move ahead.

LS: If you could go back and use one word to describe Wright State when you came here, what would that be?

CW: Several words are coming to mind, so I need a minute to think here. "Vigorous".

LS: I'm sorry?

CW: Vigorous.

LS: Vigorous, okay. What would be a one word perception of Wright State today, in your view?

CW: I honestly don't know it that well. I read the magazine when it comes. But I guess I would say mature. You know, reading about it and seeing its accomplishments, when I first came and while I was here it was still growing and becoming itself, and it seems like it has to me.

LS: Do you have any questions you would like to ask us, and I'm using "us" collectively? Or any comments?

CW: Well, I'll start with a comment. My job here prepared me to move on to be a provost and then a president and so I am on a very personal level thankful for that. If I had remained Director of Admissions I don't think that would have happened. But getting the deanship made it happen. So I'm very thankful that events came together as they did and I had seven wonderful years in Dayton and then a great career from then on.

LS: You made an interesting statement right at the beginning, that you were hired prior to search committees.

CW: In Dayton and the Dayton Public Schools. There was a search committee when I came, Jim Dodson, the head librarian, was the chair and I reported to a man named Ed Pollack who was vice-President for Student Life. He later was changed to vice-President for Advancement and Elenore Cook took Student Life over. But where was I going with that?

LS: I was intrigued by your statement. You know, things have changed today.

CW: Right, and rightly so.

LS: Yes, and you probably saw that as president of a university.

CW: Oh, of course, yes.

LS: Well, it's so nice to have you back on campus.

CW: Are you glad you came and stayed?

LS: Yes, very much so. It's a unique place to be, and of course right now the library where we are doing this recording is probably the real gem of this university.

CW: It is the heart of the university, there is no question about that.

LS: You mentioned the library here, I remember when it was down in the basement of Millett. You had to go down in those stairs.

CW: It must have just opened not too long before I left then, because it opened soon after you came?

LS: Yeah.

CW: Yeah.

LS: Well, thank you very much and if you think of anything else you'd like to make an addendum to, all you have to do is contact us.

CW: Well, it's a wonderful place and I'm glad to be a little part of it in the early years.

LS: The oral history is becoming very interesting. Thank you.

CW: Thank you.