



David Robinson Oral History Interview, September 30, 2015

Title

“Growing the Humanities at OSU”

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Center for the Humanities, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Robinson discusses his upbringing in west Texas, his education at the University of Texas - Austin, and the faculty members there who influenced him to pursue studies in English literature. He then touches upon his graduate pursuits at Harvard Divinity School and the University of Wisconsin - Madison, noting the beginnings of his interest in the American Transcendentalists that took root during these years.

The primary focus of the interview is Robinson's career as a humanities scholar at Oregon State University. In this, he recalls his acceptance of a faculty position at OSU, the transition period that the OSU College of Liberal Arts found itself in during that time, his early impressions of the university, and the genesis of what would become the OSU Center for the Humanities. From there, Robinson reflects on his evolution as a teacher, his leadership of the American Studies program, changes on campus that he has observed over the years, and his involvement with the Center for the Humanities as a fellow in the 1980s. Next, Robinson details his scholarly work on Ralph Waldo Emerson, notes his experiences in Germany as a Fulbright Fellow, and speaks of the impact and importance of the Oregon Professorship in English, the endowed chair that he has held since 1991.

As the session nears its conclusion, Robinson comments on the summer teacher instruction program on American Transcendentalism that he led for nine years, and shares his perspective on the activities of the Center for the Humanities, which he has directed since 2001. The interview closes with Robinson's thoughts on the continuing evolution of OSU and his own ambitions for the future.

Interviewee

David Robinson

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/robinson/>

Transcript

David Robinson: I'm David Robinson, I'm director of the Center for Humanities at Oregon State University, and also a professor of English at OSU.

Janice Dilg: And my name is Janice Dilg, I'm the oral historian with the Oregon State University Sesquicentennial Oral History Project. Today is September 30th, 2015. Thank for participating in the project.

DR: It's a pleasure, thank you.

JD: If you would give us a little background of yourself – where you're from, a little about your family, and early upbringing.

DR: OK, I was born in Odessa, Texas, out in west Texas – oil field country, best known for *Friday Night Lights*. Went to school there and then on to college at the University of Texas at Austin. My parents were from central Texas – Gatesville, Abilene and around – and my father ran a coffee shop/barbecue kind of place for a while, and later worked in the auto parts business. And my mother worked with the courthouse in Odessa, Ector County; a clerical job there. I have an older sister who is now retired, but an English teacher, in Fort Worth; a younger brother who is a musician, a very good guitarist and blues harmonica player; and a younger sister who is still also in Texas, and she's a pharmacist. I graduated from Odessa High School, 1966, did one year there at the junior college, and then on to the University of Texas, where I finished in 1970.

JD: And before you get too far down that path, what were some of your early interests and hobbies, and your connection with education?

DR: Well, always a passionate baseball fan. And, of course, that meant only t.v., where you could see the big leagues in those days, and playing Little League and so forth. In school I became very interested in speech and debate, and was on the – we had a very good leader, the director of our debate and speech group there. So I was on the debate team at Odessa High and later at the University of Texas. So that was one of my key focuses there. And I think that eventually sort of moved me into interest in language, interest in words, interest in creating ways of expression. And that led me into English Literature as a major in college.

JD: It sounds like you had somewhat of an idea of what you might want to major in, when you headed off to college? Or how did that develop?

DR: I think my first thought was to be an attorney, and to go to law school, which friends of mine did. That's, of course, connected with the debating – visions of Perry Mason and all that kind of thing. But some good teachers in the English department there at the University of Texas sort of moved me toward literature. Near the end of my undergraduate work, I connected with the Philosophy department at the University of Texas, which was very highly regarded nationally, had some wonderful scholars and teachers there. Though he was not someone that I was ever able to have a class with - he was retired by that time - Charles Hartshorne, a great metaphysician, was there. And Louis Mackey, who was a medieval historian and also had interest in aesthetics, was there. Very influential. A great role model on how to teach, how to live in ideas, how to make things that you would never think would be very interesting, fascinating - Thomas Aquinas and the medieval philosophers. So that was a very big part of the sort of changes I went through, I suppose, during the college years.

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[technical interruption]

JD: So we're back on recording after taking a short break to get out of the sun, and you were going to continue on with your path through higher education yourself.

DR: Yeah, so I was talking about English and philosophy at the University of Texas. And from there I went into a program of theological studies at Harvard Divinity School. It was a two-year program, and that introduced me, more fully,

to the New England Transcendentalists. I stayed in the dorm where Ralph Waldo Emerson had lived and delivered his Divinity School address. So it was very steeped in that kind of history and also a very lively place.

And it gave me, I think, a very good grounding then to continue my graduate studies in literature at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, with a grounding not only in literature itself but in religion and the theological questions that stood behind Emerson's emergence from a minister to a poet and essayist. And that eventually became the subject of my doctoral dissertation, which was the theological background in New England Unitarianism of Emerson's thinking, as he moved from being a minister into being a public lecturer, essayist, poet and kind of "the sage of Concord," as he's now thought of.

I was lucky, at the University of Wisconsin, to have been able to work with Merton Sealts, a great Melville scholar who was also, at the same time, working on Emerson and was one of the editors of the new edition, the scholarly edition, of Emerson's journals. Emerson kept extremely extensive journal notations daily, and these are recognized as a real clue to his thinking, the development of his thinking. And so Sealts had really a strong grip on the whole subject and was a very good mentor. You did not want to turn in weak work to Merton Sealts. He had very high standards, but was also very kind and very supportive of the students that worked with him. So very often, one's career in graduate school very much depends on whether you are able to connect with the right kind of teacher and mentor, and in that way I was very lucky, I think. Madison was a wonderful place too. I still miss it, in certain ways, though not those bitter winters that they have.

JD: Well that was quite the series of cultural changes as well, from Odessa, Texas to Massachusetts, to the midlands.

DR: The Midwest, yes. Right. Following me along here – I don't know how personal we want to get here – but following me along here, from a meeting that we had as lab partners in freshman biology at the University of Texas, was my wife Gwen. And she's been tremendously helpful and supportive of my work.

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JD: And you had mentioned - I believe it was in some of your earlier studies, your undergraduate work - that you felt like there were professors who were mentoring you about teaching and, perhaps, where you would go once you had graduated. When did it become clear to you that university professor was a path for you?

DR: I began thinking about that as an undergraduate at the University of Texas. There were several very good teachers – I mentioned Louis Mackey and there were others – and I could see that it took a certain kind of love of the material, love of the subject. And that was always crucial in the teachers that I've had. I was also able, at Harvard Divinity School, to work with Conrad Wright, who is sort of the great historian of New England Unitarianism, and has also worked on Emerson and the Transcendentalists, seeing them as a kind of off-shoot, or part of, the well-established Unitarian churches in Massachusetts. Which had, curiously, evolved out of the early Puritan settlements, became liberalized over several generations of ministers, and that was the grounding – religiously speaking – from which Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and other members of that New England Transcendentalist group came.

He too was a fairly exacting scholar with a real capacity for clear writing and exposition that is always a great example, I think. You're usually not directly taught, "this is how you teach." You pick it up by example, and that is the case, I think, for almost any graduate student. Seminars on how to teach become a little mechanical, or would be, I think. And it's always the subject itself – the text you're reading, the author you're studying – that is really driving both the intellectual discovery and the capacity to teach it, which are kind of completely connected, I think.

JD: So you finish your graduate studies and how did OSU beckon? Or what was the progress out to the West Coast?

DR: Well, the profession's various academic disciplines are all national markets, essentially. Each of the disciplines has its annual meeting, and that's where graduate students who are just finishing up go to see what positions are available and do the interviews and so forth. So you have to be ready to go almost anywhere. And it remains the case, in any particular position, that advancement is very often connected with a move from one place to another. I was lucky enough, as I feel, not to have to take that kind of move, but that's the way the market works.

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So the best, most exciting interview I had, going to the Modern Language Association meeting that year, was with the group from Oregon State. I had never been to Oregon. One friend in Madison, who was from California, said, "that's really nice up there." So I was interested in that sense. But it was more the sense that things were moving, that there was energy, that there was a building process that was very attractive to me. And the person who was sort of leading the charge there was Richard Astro, the chair of the department there, a fairly recent young chair of the department of English. And Robert Frank, who was the assistant chair, working very closely with him in the beginning of the building of a more professionalized, I guess you could call it - more research-oriented, you may want to call it - a stronger department of English in the national sense of what the discipline of the study of literature was at that time. Which, of course, takes you into some of the deeper history of Oregon State, about why there was an effort underway to build this department in the liberal arts at that point.

JD: And recount a little bit of that, because it is germane.

DR: Yeah. I don't know the deeper historical details of all of this. But there was a point, in the 1930s I believe, at which there was a division of duties that was imposed on the Oregon universities – the University of Oregon and Oregon State University – in which Oregon State simply was denied the opportunity to offer what seemed to be fairly fundamental degrees in a four-year university. Psychology, philosophy, English, history, sociology. In other words, there simply was no degree-granting liberal arts college. And this, I think, was finally corrected - or the efforts to build a full university with established degrees - was in the mid-'60s; '66, '67, along in there. Richard Astro said that he was the first English major at Oregon State. At any rate, he was definitely coming back to build something there.

And I think that what was happening there in the mid-'70s continues. The curriculum is still not fully developed at the graduate level in the College of Liberal Arts. And there certainly is building going on to find and effectively set in motion the kind of graduate work - in the humanities, in the social sciences, in the arts - that a university like Oregon State really needs. But the situation coming in was interesting. There was really a fine faculty here; many early excellent teachers. But no chance, really until the mid-'60s, to work with juniors and seniors in degrees. No particular pressure or incentive to do scholarly work or publish beyond what they had done in their graduate work. So it was a fairly significant shift. And it must have been a period of growth here, because for several years there in the mid-'70s into the early '80s, we were able, in our department, to recruit new faculty. Which was quite important, I think, because the talent that was available in the job market for English professors at that time was very good. And if you could get people out to Corvallis to see the campus and to see what was happening in the English department, you were at a very good advantage in terms of recruiting new faculty.

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JD: And if you would talk a little about your first impressions of coming onto the campus of Corvallis.

DR: Well, it's a gorgeous place. And we were completely taken with Oregon itself and then, on top of that, Corvallis is a community with a lot of appeal. And the campus with the red brick buildings and the very well-kept grounds, the rhododendrons and everything. So coming from Texas and then from the Midwest, it was really quite beautiful in that way. Also, it was a very collegial place in the English department. So the people who had been recently hired and the new faculty coming in, there was a lot of collegiality, friendship, new lives being shaped here, families being shaped here. So in that way, a very good era or period to be coming in. You could see the imbalance between the sciences and the professional schools and the liberal arts. And it was troubling. But there was always, still, the effort to build and to overcome that.

JD: When we spoke earlier, I know there was one particular large NEH grant that Richard Astro perhaps led up – I'm sure he didn't do it alone – that really was perhaps an important landmark in the development of the liberal arts.

DR: Yeah it was a curricular development grant that the Oregon State English department had been awarded from the National Endowment for the Humanities, recognizing, I think, the need for further curricular development in the situation in which we were the liberal arts/humanities in a larger technical school. Astro, I think, had been instrumental in that and worked very closely with Bob Frank and also with Peter Copek, who was a relatively new member of the English department. And a number of courses were developed – courses on Northwest Studies, on literature and the sea and the ocean; so trying to make connections with other parts in the curriculum. And ultimately this, I think, laid a kind of

groundwork then for another grant in the early '80s, which helped us establish the Center for the Humanities, a research institute focusing on the humanities - literature, history, philosophy, religious studies, and related disciplines - at a university which lacked doctoral work in most of those fields.

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So that was a coup that we were able to get that. And the establishment of the center and its growth – there were more phases in its development after the original grant – was also an important signal or standard that serious scholarship was being done and that there was an important dialogue in the humanities at Oregon State that promised a kind of productive teaching and research results, as the program continued to develop.

JD: And where was the support coming from within the administration? It certainly was not happening because professors in the English department thought it was important and should happen.

DR: Right. Well, any administrator loves a grant. That's kind of a given. So anybody that's out there finding money, bringing it in, is going to gain approval and often support for that. The early building of the center – and we were very lucky here – coincided with the leadership, eventually in the Research Office, and then later as university president, of John Byrne. And the grant included provisions for matching funds which had to be raised. And almost all of the credit for that very successful fundraising was due to John Byrne's support and his leadership and his skill in it. There was an early university-wide fundraising program in which the Center for the Humanities and three other university programs – I think there was a cell research program and a couple of other scientific and technical programs – were called Foursight. So that put this effort to establish the humanities center more or less at the center of the university's goals and interests. That was, I think, extremely crucial. And leadership and support from the top is what you need for major building and curricular development efforts.

JD: And so once you're here - and you had some mentoring, or certainly some good examples of teaching - if you can recall a little about when you first were in the classroom and the courses that you taught and some of the things that intrigued you about teaching. And perhaps a bit of your evolution as a teacher.

DR: I learned a lot from teaching year in and year out. Part of our major and also part of the large Baccalaureate Core series of courses - the survey of American literature that begins with early 18th and 19th century American writing, and then three stages take you to the present day - I was teaching with some colleagues, some who had been here a long time, others who came at the same time as I did. 1976 was the year I was hired. Also Michael Oriard was hired that year, and Kerry Ahearn. We were all three teaching American literature.

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So we could talk, we could compare notes, we could ask each other questions. We could divide the duties – who's gonna take this? – and move those around without any territorial problems. There was always great interest and demand for these courses; we couldn't really fill them all. But we had a more senior colleague named Bob Jones who was supportive, flexible and loved to work with us, it seemed. So it was really a great – it's a 200-level course, it's not the great graduate seminar, but that's where the really important teaching is most of the time. You're dealing with students who are working out, what's my major? What's my vocation? What shall I do? So the kind of variety of ideas that came out of that survey were crucial to my own development as a teacher. And the things there gave me a grounding for teaching the senior-level stuff. I didn't know all of this when I got here. I had a Ph.D. but there sure were many things I had never read or didn't understand. So I was learning along – and I think that was true of Michael and Kerry and other colleagues too.

And it was fun, it was a lot of fun, and very exciting. The students were, as always – some brilliant ones, always some who were just barely making it, and a lot in between. But you always knew that there were going to be classes of 40, 50, 60; there were going to be some really, really, smart, intelligent, capable students who took it seriously. They didn't have to be English majors, they could be from anywhere in the curriculum, but they took this stuff to heart and really worked very hard to learn it and to be able to express themselves. So that's always rewarding. It's always frustrating because it starts over again, every term. You know, "I've already taught that." But you do it again. But there's always that sense that there are those students who really have developed, and you've been part of it, in a course like that.

JD: And in 1979 you became director of the American Studies program. Perhaps talk a bit about becoming director and just a little about the American Studies program at OSU.

DR: This was a program that began in the late '60s – I'd say '68, '69 – and was designed to be a course that encompassed ideas from a range of different academic disciplines and subjects, but which focused on American culture and the issues that defined the United States as a nation and a culture. And there is a national academic association, the American Studies Association. And I think the impetus for that comes from the history major who really wants the focus on the United States, and really wants to connect the dates, the events, and the key figures with other parts of the culture. And of the English major, say, who is really more interested in the way literature reveals the culture and allows you to think about broader issues connected with the identity of America within a larger world of different cultures.

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So Professor McGrath was a political scientist and he had become the person who had really gotten the program going. He retired and I was chosen to follow him up, and the interdisciplinary appeal of the program was one of its strengths. You didn't have to restrict yourself to the major in political science, you could combine these other courses. That eventually was, in a sense, undercut or duplicated by the development of a whole Liberal Studies program. So over a couple of decades, the American Studies program became more and more a kind of advisor-oriented and a smaller program that seemed to be more appealing to students who had particular interests in, and were fairly well-grounded, in questions of American studies. So the program was finally discontinued here in 2010, I think it is, though it is still alive and well and being taught at the Cascades campus in Bend, where it is has the kind of characteristic that fits their curriculum very well. Neil Brown is one of the key people working in American Studies.

The major work for me there was advising; helping students work out the courses that would best fit for their baccalaureate plan. And when you are advising students, then you have to step back and see the curriculum more as a whole than you would simply as the person who teaches the courses in American literature. So I learned a lot about the university, about student motivations for taking courses, the problems that students seemed to have. Sometimes with the schedules and the curricular offerings, what works best, in many cases. It was enjoyable work that really offered a whole new way of looking at the educational process.

JD: And were you observing campus-wide changes in far as, I would say, through the '80s and '90s – and, of course, Measure 5 came along in the early '90s. But also changes in presidents; kind of the evolution you were experiencing.

DR: Right. So President MacVicar was leading things as president when I came in. It was clear to me that he worked very well with and was very supportive of Richard Astro and what he was doing. Astro even had arranged an interview with the university president during this recruiting process to show that, "we're working at it. We're building." So that was very interesting there.

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And then John Byrne became president. He's an oceanographer, an internationally known oceanographer. But a very strong supporter of the arts; he's a very big fan of the arts and music culture here in Corvallis. And he gave really great leadership in moving forward with the building that was beginning in the '70s, when I first arrived. I guess during those years the university grew, in terms of its enrollment, then fell back a little, then grew again. So there was often a fluctuation. But Measure 5 and the other things that changed the state budget, as the state had to pick up in the public schools, that made the money for the universities more and more scarce. And so then there was a period, the '90s into the 2000s, in which there was a lot of attrition. "How much will be it cut back this year? How much the next year? What positions will we lose?" and so forth. Difficult times. You just have to hope for the best and do the best. But it affects the curriculum in difficult ways. It certainly affects morale in those ways.

And speaking where we are in 2015, it's a process that's going on in many, many universities. Oregon State though, is managing to continue, or has begun again, a kind of upward growth. Huge, of course, growth in students, and very sudden growth in the student population. Enormous growth in building. There have been more buildings built in the last six or seven years, it seems to me, than in the entire rest of my career here. So the campus is infilling, certainly, with a lot of buildings which are very well done. So it's really great to see those things happening.

JD: And even some interesting adaptive re-use of some of the oldest buildings on campus.

DR: Absolutely, yeah, that may even be the best part of all, the way that they are sort of using some of the old buildings, with their wonderful design, as shells and refurbishing them. Oregon State, it has some really – when you begin to explore them and think about them – some gorgeous buildings. Particularly Weatherford; that's the one on every postcard. But the Memorial Union is a truly wonderful building, reflecting the '20s, when the university was really growing, and there were supposed to be three or four more Weatherfords circling – in one plan – circling the MU. Of course, then came the Great Depression, but they were thinking big in those days.

Buildings don't teach anybody anything, but they can be important in making that kind of connection between the student to the professor and the subject work well. And bad facilities are a negative in whole process. So the campus is changing.

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JD: During this time period, in the '80s, you started to have a relationship with the Center for the Humanities as being a recipient of several fellowships. Talk a little about what the program was and your engagement with it.

DR: So what is a center for the humanities? It's supposed to support research in the humanities. So what is research in the humanities? It's not a lab; you're not mixing chemicals or anything. You're essentially reading, locating material in an archival sense, tracking things down, and interpreting things through intensive study and dialogue and conversation with others. So the Center for the Humanities, and other centers like it – there's a kind of national coalition of these things that exists among the member universities – the aim of it is to enhance that dialogue and to make it more possible to do the intensive study and tracking and research that constitutes humanities scholarship.

So what our center does is provide a certain number of faculty a term down from their teaching, when they're made an award – teaching and committee work and all the other things that are happening – so that they can focus exclusively on the particular project that they're working on. They're selected by an advisory board which, in a competitive process, chooses what they consider to be the most promising. And then, through being located here in the Humanities Center, there are greater opportunities for people working on subjects that are connected with one another or using methods that might be similar to each other or finding out about new areas that might be explored. That whole process of the intensive dive into a research project can be enhanced through that kind of dialogue.

[technical interruption]

JD: So Ralph Waldo Emerson had struck a chord with you early on and this was a time when you could explore some of his work more. And you had a lot of publications that started coming out during this time period. Talk a little about the specific work that you did with the fellowship and beyond.

DR: Right. So, I've written two books on Emerson, the first of which was a book that sort of extended my doctoral dissertation and talked about Emerson as a religious writer, through his ministry, and then into what you could think of as his larger public career.

[technical interruption]

JD: So continue on with your work on Emerson.

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DR: Yeah, so the Center fellowships that I had were - as I was describing, you sort of get a break from teaching - and full concentration helped me work out that longer version of Emerson's early career. And later I published a sequel of that, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life*, in which I talk about how his own thinking evolved and changed in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s. Less the totally optimistic idealist, more and more the pragmatist who is interested less in the pure idea than in how it can be effectively lived - the conduct of life. So that was the title of one of his great later volumes. What is the philosophical question? How to live. How to conduct your life.

So his thinking evolved in that direction and that book was about the reasons that it did. Tragedy: he lost a son, a five year old son, which was a great blow. He actually, for someone as positive and sort of affirmative as he was, lost his father when he was eight, lost two brothers with whom he was very close, lost his very dear and beloved first wife. So his life is just punctuated with these blows from which he had to remake himself every time. I think that the death of his first wife, Ellen, had a lot to do with his decision to leave the ministry and simply go do something that he felt he needed to do outside the institutional structures of the church in which he was. And the loss of his son – the greatest, I think, of his losses – had a lot to do with the shifting focus toward the moments of life and how they should be lived.

And then, behind all that, the national crisis – slavery – building, building, building. He wasn't a political person; he did not like politics. He distrusted politicians and did not think highly of many of them. But he ultimately saw that this was the great moral question and that he had to take a stand; that he had to do what he could. So he did become an anti-slavery speaker. For him, the whole question of the continuance of slavery was the question of, which way would western civilization go? That if it were allowed to be continued, then what we faced was a kind of complete moral decadence in the culture. So with some political ideas and some religious ideas, his career changed somewhat, and he became more a public figure. And so those are the ideas that the second book gets into.

There was also support along the way - there were fellowships from the Center - but from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which provides these kind of fellowships, competitive trials, every year. And the American Council of Learned Societies. And those were very helpful. Teaching is a wonderful thing, but it takes up every amount of time that you let it. There is sort of no limit to the work that you can put into being prepared. So there's a kind of necessity of the sabbatical or these kinds of fellowship opportunities to maintain the intellectual momentum that's really needed for both writing the scholarly stuff and maintaining the impetus in the classroom.

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Along the way, I got interested in – this from a suggestion from my colleague, Kerry Ahearn – a southern writer. So connecting a little bit, I suppose, back there with - he's not a Texan, but he's a Tennessee writer - Peter Taylor, who wrote a lot of short fiction that was published in *The New Yorker* in the '60s and '70s, and then some novels. And so I read Peter Taylor and wrote a book about his work, and I can remember working on that, and the beginning of the writing of that, in Germany. And that's where I had a really wonderful year as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Still look back at that as a very great time. Gwen and I had young kids, five and two, when we went. We could sort of take them everywhere. They loved it; they seemed to be having a good time and we did too.

And to read American literature with German students, some of whose English was better than mine, I think – they are so well-educated in the languages in Germany – was really great fun. And this became the kind of set of connections; I met a professor in Heidelberg, Dieter Schulz, through my colleague Michael Oriard, who had done an exchange with him. So Schulz came to Corvallis and Michael went to Stuttgart where he was then. So there was a lot of back and forth among groups there, and the perspective that you get; you don't know what the United States is until you're out of it and you look back and see it, good and bad, I think, in both ways. And so that was a very big part – that was in the '80s; '84-'85, that I was there. An important moment.

JD: And what are some of the striking comparisons, similarities, or differences that you discovered between the university system that you knew and this German system?

DR: Yeah, very different systems. And the structure of that difference goes all the way down into the elementary grades and so forth. Basically, the universities in Germany certainly – and I think maybe that's true of most of the European countries – are more elitist. And I say that in a good and a bad way. But the students that I was teaching at Heidelberg were more advanced when I was teaching them than American freshmen or sophomores coming into college would have been. They were a little older; I think the equivalent of the high school there runs a little bit longer. And clearly their linguistic capacity, especially in terms of the foreign languages, was strong. But they border France and they're part of a mix of languages, really, in Europe. So there was both the opportunity and the need to have those languages too, from which America has been somewhat sheltered.

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The big difference was, in American universities you earn your credits year by year, and you sort of compile your credits, and then when you've compiled enough of your credits you graduate. In the German universities, you go to lectures, you take some seminars and write papers in them, but you must pass these very difficult exams at a couple places. And that is a system that has some, I think, strengths in terms of filtering students, but also presents them with enormous moments of high stress - the midterm exam that they have to pass, and then the final. So I prefer the American way, I guess you would say, on that; the structure of our universities. But you see the flaws in them when you teach the other system and make that comparison. It works both ways; no perfect system. Each with its strengths and weakness, I think.

JD: You talked about the balance between being able to step away from teaching and pursue your scholarship and that was important in rejuvenating, but you clearly continued to return to teaching and excel at teaching. And you received several awards: in '83 a Faculty Excellence Award for teaching, and then in 1991 you actually were named the first Oregon Professor of English. Talk about what that honor entailed and a bit of your thoughts on that.

DR: It was really, in a certain way, a set of coincidences that led to that. There was a bequest made to the university by an anonymous donor. And part of the bequest specified English as one of the fields that the donor hoped to support. We assumed it was an alumni, a loyal alumni with wonderful memories of his or her education at OSU, but we really do not know who the donor was and haven't been able to find out. And so this led to connecting with a state program to encourage endowed professorships in the universities as a way to kind of bring the quality and the competitiveness of the Oregon universities up. So this was used to match that and establish an endowed professorship. It's the first endowed professorship in the College of Liberal Arts here. And it marks, I think, the beginning of that kind of faculty development that has continued in the college. And, of course, it was a very great honor. It did give me more time to focus on my research and resources for that, and it's been a great honor and a real benefit to have that. Also it sort of was, historically thinking, a very good marker for the continuing growth of Liberal Arts as an equal partner in the whole university set-up.

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One of the things that happened around that time that was also, to me, very important was that I directed a series of seminars, summer seminars, for teachers here on campus at Oregon State, that were funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This was a great program and it still exists for university teachers, but I think it's been cut way back due to different priorities and funding problems. But I wish it would come back in full force through the endowment. But it brought about twelve high school teachers – language arts, English, history, those fields – to campus to talk about Thoreau, Emerson and the Transcendentalists. So it was a competitive process for choosing these. There were some really talented teachers out there, and they came from all over: from the East Coast to California and the Midwest, the South. They loved it in Corvallis – it wasn't humid, it was beautiful, things were blooming everywhere and so forth. They weren't teaching, they were back to college. So they were having fun.

And some of them knew a lot about Thoreau and Emerson. Thoreau more; he was the one that attracted a lot of them. This was when environmental studies, the green ethic and everything, was really blooming in literary studies. And these courses were like what you imagine the perfect courses would be. Everybody was well-read. Everybody was enthusiastic. Everybody was having fun. The dialogue just got going and sustained itself. So they were great experiences for me, and certainly the teachers seemed to enjoy them. I think I did nine of them or so, there in the late '80s and early '90s. There was one marriage from the group. So there was obviously a fair amount of social interaction that was a lot of fun for them too. So that's a great series there. It did cash in your summer pretty well, because they were pretty intense things. We probably went for six weeks or five weeks, all day, and so I was wiped out at the end of these. But very happy about it. That is one of the moments where research and teaching really come together in a beautiful way.

JD: Well and I would think, you talked about teachers coming from all around the country, that there would be sort of an interesting benefit to OSU as well.

DR: Yeah, I think people would come back to visit after they had been here for the summer. Some were looking – inquiries about real estate and these kinds of things. But yeah, people really did have a good time and, it was really great, the Memorial Union allowed us to use one of its – they have some lovely old seminar rooms there. Some of them that open out onto the portico out there. And we were there and it was kind of at the center of things, and it was very pleasant.

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JD: And through your research and writing, you were also quite well-known outside of Oregon State University, just as being an eminent Emerson scholar, and would get asked to come and lecture and do presentations. How does that factor into your overall career and work? And what feeds what?

DR: The whole thing – scholarly exchange, the publishing of things, giving papers, the visiting lectures – it's a national, now even more international, process that's going on. So to be able to stay in touch with other people who are doing work similar to yours is both enjoyable and crucial, really, to the continuing advance of this long-running dialogue. I was very happy to be able to speak at Harvard Divinity School, my old alma mater, once on William Ellery Channing in a program celebrating Channing, who was part of that. And then also on Emerson's Divinity School address at the 150th, the sesquicentennial, of that at Harvard Divinity School. Those were great moments for me in being able to come back, at least in part, as a product of Harvard Divinity School, and present new work that came, in part, out of the studies that I had done there.

And that, it is recognition of a kind. And universities do pursue this and desire it. And so to have faculty doing things on a national stage is very much part of what, I think, drives the ambition of the entire institution. It has to be for Oregon, but it also needs to be seen as part of this much larger national network of places of learning, and to have a significant place in it. To build that in the humanities is very important, I think; to add that to the reputation that the university has in many other things as well. So, in making a contribution to that, I feel very good.

JD: And then in 2001, you actually did become the director of the Center for the Humanities.

DR: Well, the sad part of that was that the founding director, Peter Copek - who had been instrumental in getting the grant and also worked very closely with John Byrne and the OSU Office of Research to get the actual building, the Autzen House building that we have now, he had been crucial in all of that - he unexpectedly passed away. And everyone who has been part of this center wants it to continue. It has a real loyalty among the faculty. So I was happy to step in and help keep it going there. Fortunately we had then and still have a very strong associate director, Wendy Madar, so I was happy to help Wendy keep things going, and then to take over as the permanent director. I did not think I would ever do administrative work, but this was a special thing.

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So it's been a great experience. Your job is to help your colleagues do the thing that is crucial to them; develop the work that they have already spent so much of their time in graduate studies developing, to make that become real in a publication. And in doing that you are helping to create a larger environment of ideas, and the exchange of ideas, and serious thinking. That is crucial to the university. So reminding everyone that this is what a university is supposed to do is good duty. And I've enjoyed that. Meeting people and really getting to know them better. Hear their work presented and so forth. Different historians and political scientists; we have a fairly good mix of people who are working in their fields, and that makes it exciting. It has been very good. And to sort of give kind of an anchor to the idea of a continuing growth in the humanities and the arts study has been, I've felt, well worth the effort that I've put into it.

JD: And do you – and I say "you" as the entire center – as universities change, you've spoken about the growth in the student body and diversity in the student body, do you see the mission needing to evolve? Or what do you see as the near future? Or perhaps distant future?

DR: I think its mission is still crucial, and I hope that opportunities will open for there to be more ways that we can support the work that's going on here. We keep the building full, so unless there's some major change, it will be what it is in that sense for a long time. If the fellowships can be enhanced so that they become, in some way, more valuable; if we can contribute – which we do – but if we can contribute more to other programs going on campus, lecture series and so forth, that's a goal that I always have. So, steady as she goes with hope of being able to expand, in a sense, the programs that are there and working well.

The subjects and focuses of humanities scholarship do change, but the work itself – as in science or any other learned discipline – remains the same. And there are great new aids to this in terms of the web; everything you can do in terms of hunting things down digitally is a really great thing. But it always still comes back to the same wrestling with the ideas and working out how they can best be expressed, which is sort of the bottom line for all of that.

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JD: This is a rather large question, but as you think over the trajectory of your career and how that fits into, perhaps, the evolution of the university as a whole, a little summation of that and perhaps even where you see next steps?

DR: It's a wonderful thing to feel that you have had a part in building something that has had some really positive results for others. And that's the way I feel about the work in the center and, in a larger way, the building that's gone on in the English department and in the College of Liberal Arts. You give up, at the beginning, I suppose, certain things in doing this, but in the long run I've found it to be satisfying.

Well, where next? Retirement one of these years. And the poor thing, you don't want to talk about the step after that. But I'm sure I'll continue on in the research and scholarship I do, and enjoy opportunities to connect with my colleagues here on campus and elsewhere. I'll take a few trips, I'm sure, after the retirement comes. But no dramatic changes, I hope.

JD: Are there any topics or things that you were hoping I would ask you about that I haven't yet that you want to make sure gets captured and that gets saved for posterity in the archives?

DR: I think we've covered things pretty well from my perspective. Just to say that the project of doing this oral history is such a great idea. I'm very happy to be a part of it and hope it turns out well. And I can't imagine that that won't be a very useful kind of thing for the university going forward, to have this series of perspectives on things locked up.

JD: Well, on behalf of the project, thank you for taking the time to contribute to it. It's been great.

DR: Yeah, thanks very much.

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