



Larry Roper Oral History Interview, November 7, 2014

Title

“Intervening the Isms at OSU”

Date

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Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Roper discusses his upbringing in Akron, Ohio, his earliest exposure to higher education, and his decision to pursue a career path as a university administrator.

From there he recounts his arrival at Oregon State University, his initial impressions of the region, and the state of OSU during an era of severe budget cuts. Roper then describes his initial activities as both an administrator and a teaching professor, the progression of his leadership style, his contributions to the OSU "Campus Compact," his heavy involvement with national professional organizations, and the innovations that have been deployed by Student Affairs during his years as Vice Provost.

Roper's memories of OSU presidents with whom he has worked are of particular note: during the session he reflects in detail on his contacts with John Byrne, Paul Risser, Tim White and Ed Ray. He likewise shares his thoughts on the continuing importance of the land grant mission at Oregon State.

The next segment of the interview focuses, in depth, on Roper's perspectives on diversity issues at OSU. In this, he notes the role that he has played in mediating hurtful situations; speaks in particular of his involvement with the "I, Too, Am OSU" campaign; discusses his personal experiences as one of the university's first African American upper administrators; and details changes that he has observed within Corvallis during his years in Oregon.

As the session nears its end, Roper shares a few of his more light-hearted memories, including his involvement with a university-wide "Dancing with the Stars" competition. The interview concludes with reflections on his decision to retire from the Vice Provost's office and the gratitude that he feels towards his colleagues at OSU.

Interviewee

Larry Roper

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

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

Transcript

Janice Dilg: So I'm here today with Dr. Larry Roper. We're in the Valley Library, in Corvallis. Today is Friday, November 7th, 2014. My name is Janice Dilg, and I'm doing this interview as part of the Oregon 150 Project. Welcome.

Larry Roper: Thank you. Glad to be here.

JD: So, I thought we would start a little—you've clearly spent your life in higher education.

LR: Yes.

JD: But what were your views of higher education, or your family's views, as you were growing up?

LR: Growing up, we actually had little knowledge of, or interaction with, higher education—at least understanding of higher education, for sure. I grew up in an inner-city environment in Akron, Ohio. No one in my family had gone to college, and so it literally was not on the radar until teachers began to mention it to me as a possibility that I should consider, and pursue. And then in high school, actually, I worked in the dish room at the University of Akron, which was adjacent to my high school, so that was the first time I actually had sort of direct interaction with a college or university, and to interact with college students. I began to think, "Yeah, I can do this."

JD: Mm-hm. Liked what you saw.

LR: Yes. Yes.

JD: And you've talked in some other interviews about taking a fairly traditional path to your position in Student Affairs?

LR: Yes.

JD: That you started fairly early, when you were at college, yourself?

LR: Yes.

JD: What inspired you to put you on the path to a career in Student Affairs?

LR: Oh, I was actually stimulated to think about it by my Dean of Students as an undergraduate. He became a part of my life early on in my college career, when I was struggling, and he sought me out to offer help. And as time went on, I began to sort of look at him, and ask, sort of, "How did you get to do this," and, "How can I do this kind of work?" So I really got inspired to emulate my own Dean of Students.

JD: So this was when you were at Heidelberg?

LR: Yes, it was.

JD: And you talked about being an RA. I guess I hadn't realized that was perhaps the first step on a path to—

LR: Yes. Yes, it is. They actually refer to RA positions as paraprofessional positions, and so you serve in this sort of quasi-professional roles, in that you assume some responsibilities as agents of an institution, in terms of supporting students, and sort of maintaining educational environment in the residence halls, and student conduct, discipline, and sort of managing community dynamics. And so, yeah, you began to use some of the same skills that will be required of you as a professional, and so it really is a wonderful orientation to this type of work.

JD: And so you continued on that path, and launched into a professional career. Perhaps talk just briefly about what your career looked like before you came to Oregon State.

LR: Yes, I spent the early, formative years, what I call the formative years of my career, working primarily in residential environments, so as a residence hall director, and as an area coordinator, and then ultimately, as a Director of Housing, and Associate Dean of Students. And it was in that Associate Dean of Students position that I began to sort of explore

outside of the housing domain, to think about what other kinds of things I could do in Student Affairs. And so as a result, I've had work—I've worked in areas of Multicultural Affairs. I've done counseling, and I've worked in Career Services, and also coached, so I've done a broad range of things that have caused me to interact with students in different settings, and different contexts.

And so my career really was focused on just sort of trying to acquire progressively responsible—like most folks' careers, progressively responsible roles, until ultimately I was hired as a Dean of Students at a small college in Philadelphia, just outside of Philadelphia, and then from there went to a Dean of Students/Vice President for Student Affairs position at another small Catholic college in Rochester, New York, and did that for seven years prior to coming here.

JD: Mm-hm. So you're in Rochester, New York. How did Oregon State University get on your radar, and how did you come to this institution?

LR: Yeah, it was very interesting. Actually, it was through a letter from Tom Sherman, who was the chair of the search committee for the Vice Provost of Student Affairs position here. I had known Tom when I was working on my doctorate at the University of Maryland, and he just sent me the position announcement, and jotted a handwritten note on it, to say, "Larry, I would love it if you would consider applying for this position." And that just sparked me to—I was very happy where I was, but I was also intrigued by what Oregon might be, and just to even look at the position. And so I applied, and was asked to interview, and then ultimately offered the position.

JD: So what did you know about Oregon before you came out for your interview?

LR: Nothing.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: I mean, I knew where it was on the map. [Laughs] And like most people in the east, I had this vision of sort of mountains, and knew that there was an ocean, but had no idea what the coast would look like. I lived in Davis, California, for a couple years in the late '70s, and so I sort of knew what sort of that part of northern California looked like, but had never driven further north than Mendocino County in California, so I wasn't really aware of what Oregon would look like, but I just sort of had this sort of stereotypic view of green and mountains.

JD: And then what were your first impressions, once you arrived on the scene?

LR: It's really interesting, because in my interview, people asked me what my first impressions were when I drove into town, and I said my first reaction was, "Mayberry."

JD: [Laughs]

LR: Because I had lived primarily in urban areas, and so coming into a small town, this felt like a really quaint place. But then ultimately—but then eventually, after spending a few—I came here three days before my interview, and just sort of hung out in town, without the search committee or anybody from the university knowing that I was here, because I wanted to see if this was a place that I could live. And as I spent time here, I became sort of intrigued by this quiet depth that existed among the people. It's like, just sitting in coffee shops, and having people come over and just say, "Hey, how are you," and just striking up conversations—which is unusual for somebody in the urban area, because it immediately sparks suspicion when people come up to you and start to ask you about where you live, and what you're doing.

But in the process of doing that, people would just say, "Oh, you're visiting? What are you visiting for?" And then they would start to sort of talk about the live-ability of the community, talk about what they saw as some of the prevailing issues in the community. And so by the time the process, the interview process, started, I felt convinced that I could live here, and live here comfortably.

JD: Mm-hm. And what was OSU looking for in a Vice Provost at that point? And this is 1985, '86.

LR: 1995—

JD: '95, excuse me.

LR: —was when I moved here, so yeah, it was in the winter of '95 that I was interviewing. And my sense was they were looking for someone to—quite frankly, to continue the legacy of what Jo Anne Trow, and folks before her, had begun, in terms of having a professional organization that kept students at the center of the work. But I think there was also a desire for a revival, and really of more a revival of the spirit of the organization, not necessarily an intellectual revival. I think people were certainly intellectually astute and engaged. But because of some of the things that had happened with Ballot Measure 5, I think there was a psychological weariness, and an emotional fatigue that needed to be addressed. And so I think it was sort of this desire for restoration.

JD: And you were undaunted by the prospects of coming to a location, a state, that had just massively cut its budget in higher education?

LR: Yeah. I wasn't bothered by that at all, but part of it was because I was coming from a small private school that struggled. Lots of small private schools—you're so tuition-dependent, and every student matters, and so you're wearing many, many hats, and you're always stretched for resources. And so as challenged as people here felt about their budgets, it still felt like more money than any place I had ever been had. [0:10:00] So I think it was more of a matter of, "Yes, we don't have as much as you used to have, but that doesn't mean we don't have."

And I think part of it, also, was one of the advantages of growing up in poverty, is that the lack of money is never a reason to not have dreams and aspirations, and to work for a positive future. So I felt like the sort of psychological perspective that I had gotten growing up in poverty could actually be a strength as a leader in an environment such as this.

JD: Mm-hm. And did you have personal goals, initially, when you arrived here, of what you wanted to accomplish?

LR: No, I didn't. It was really interesting, because one of my first acts when I got here was to go on a tour, meeting with all of the academic deans, and that's the most constant—consistent question that I received, and sort of, "What are your goals?" And basically I would say, "I don't have any," but what I did have, as an aspiration, was to uncover the dreams and the goals that already existed here. I felt that as a leader, one of the biggest mistakes that people make, often time, is to come into a place believing that the people there don't have dreams and goals. And so they come in and feel like they need to sort of supplant whatever's there with their vision for the future. So then the goal becomes, "How do I get everybody's energy pointed in the direction of endorsing what's inside of me?" as opposed to, "How do I point my energy toward endorsing what's residing inside the organization?"

So my challenge was, really, to say, "How can I figure out what's residing within the organization, and then use my energy to act on behalf of that?" with a belief that the people who are here care deeply about students. They care deeply about the success of the university. My challenge is to uncover that and give form to it.

JD: Mm-hm. And were there a few key, common dreams and aspirations that you uncovered at that time?

LR: Yes, I think it was. I mean, I think that the primary value that I uncovered was, "I want to be able to do work that demonstrates the depth of my care for students, but that also validates the confidence that I have to do my job well, and I need someone to support me in providing the infrastructure and the pathways for me to be able to act that out." So that was one of the common things. The other was, "I want to matter. I want to know that what I do, and what I believe, matters, that it matters to someone. And I want to be a part of a community. I don't want to live or work in isolation; I want to be in relationship with others."

JD: And I know that you came with kind of—well, I'll say a dual role, but it probably was more complex than that, but you also came as a professor in the Ethnic Studies Department, which was brand new.

LR: Yes.

JD: Can you talk a little about kind of what these two roles were, and starting in the Ethnic Studies Department?

LR: Yeah. While I the dual role, it was very clear that 90 percent of my identity was really about being Vice Provost of Student Affairs. That was where the institution needed me, but my academic identity and academic home was Ethnic

Studies. And so the primary relationship there, more than anything, was really just about having relationship with the faculty there. Initially, I did not teach. It actually was several years before I taught an Ethnic Studies course, just because the weight of the Student Affairs organization was so heavy. But ultimately, I began to teach in the Ethnic Studies Department, and began to be—played more of that academic identity.

I actually taught probably more courses in liberal arts and other ways, so I taught the—my first year there, I was part of the "Isms" program, which was a project that was funded—well, that was sponsored by the Ford Foundation, and that we initiated as an unfunded member. The Student Affairs funded our institution's participation. So taught that for several years early on, and then also taught in our graduate program in College Student Services Administration, and in our doctoral program in Community College Leadership. And then ultimately began to teach undergraduate courses, both in Ethnic Studies and as part of our "U-Engage" program, which is a first-year experience program.

JD: [0:15:00] How did the two roles, of being Vice Provost and also being a professor in the classroom—how did those two, I guess, intermesh or work together? What did you see as their relationship?

LR: I think it gave me sort of an anchor that I think anybody who works at the university should have, which is that the student experience is a holistic experience, that student life doesn't begin and end in the classroom, and it doesn't reside outside, solely outside, the classroom, that students are constantly navigating all aspects of the campus environment, and that those who teach in the classroom need to be aware that when a student comes into the threshold, they don't leave all the issues that they've encountered outside the classroom at the classroom door. They bring their whole selves into it. Just as when we encounter students outside the classroom, they also are carrying the weight of an academic experience, and the challenges of navigating that, and what that means for their futures.

JD: Mm-hm. And what appeals to you about teaching?

LR: I've always just been intrigued by—attracted to activities of the mind, and so I think it's that part. But I also like the idea of building a learning community, of watching students, in relationship with each other, make meaning of issues, and helping students to find their voice, relative to their position on particular issues. So there's the same kind of thing, again, I find in my Student Affairs role, is by helping students to develop, and helping them to find the better form of themselves.

JD: Mm-hm. And did you feel that—well, I know you're still teaching—

LR: Yes.

JD: —as soon as you're off of sabbatical. But has there been an evolution in being in the classroom, whether by cultural changes, technological changes, or just your development?

LR: Oh, absolutely! I mean, I think technology has had a huge influence on it, but I think also my own personal awareness of the idea that students should be the primary actor in the classrooms, and that the faculty member is a guide in the process, whereas I think early on my orientation to teaching sort of had me position myself as sort of the central figure, a central actor, in the process. And so, it's like: how do we use technology, and how do we use the shape of the classroom, to put students at the center? And then, what kind of resources, what kind of stimuli do we use, in order to create the right kind of agitation that they need to be able to learn?

JD: So to kind of move back to the Vice Provost position, I think you said that's someone who wears many hats, and you're kind of a bridge, perhaps, between administration, and students, and faculty. There might not be a typical day or week, but could you just kind of talk a bit, broadly, about what that position might look like for someone who's not familiar with it?

LR: Yes. It's characterized by busy-ness.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: But it's not just random busy-ness. I mean, I think that there has to be intentionality to it in order for there to be productivity. But a typical week or day would involve some kind of administrative gatherings, where I'm involved with others, that someone else has convened the group of which I'm a part, that's resolving or addressing some broad,

institutional issue, or some very specific issue, like a new policy, or a particular problem that's arisen that needs to be solved. There are those groups that I might convene for advisory reasons, or for problem-solving reasons. There's always some kind of staff meeting. So whether it's individual, or with groups, with those whom I supervise, to be able to work together around the issues. There's always individual student meetings, so whether that's a student that makes an appointment to come to see me, or a student that's a drop-in, they just show up, and say, "I've got an issue and I need help." There's also referrals, that people refer someone to me for an issue. [0:20:00]

There's some kind of advisory role, whether I'm serving as an academic advisor to a graduate student, and meeting with them around that, or supervising a thesis, or any of the student groups that I advise or sit on advisory boards for. So there's a significant amount of student interaction during that time. And then there's generally some kind of teaching, whether it's a classroom teaching or whether it's me facilitating some kind of workshop or training. I found that that was a constant feature in my professional life.

JD: So I looked at one flow chart that had all of your responsibilities, which was a pretty lengthy chart.

LR: Yes.

JD: How did you build expertise and confidence in everything from student interaction, to housing issues, to dining issues, to just the whole realm?

LR: Yeah, yeah. I think part of it is that I don't necessarily have expertise in all those areas, and I think it would have been a mistake as a supervisor to somehow suggest to those who I supervise that I had. But what I feel like I have done is cultivate the ability to listen and to learn. My biggest responsibility as a leader is to ask the question, "How can I be helpful to you, in your performance, in your success?" So if I'm supervising student health and we're dealing with some infectious disease—I don't know about infectious diseases, but what I do know is how to ask questions around, "How will we safeguard the community? What resources are necessary? Who are the partners that we need?" So I sort of have an awareness of problem-solving, but I certainly don't have a knowledge of the specifics of how to solve that particular problem. So my job is to really be an ally to those who I supervise, not to be a boss, and not to be an expert.

JD: Mm-hm. So you're certainly touching on your leadership style. Can you expand on that, and perhaps talk about how your style, and what you consider leadership to be, has evolved throughout your career?

LR: Sure. I mean, I think one of the things that I think is that when I initially came in, I really could not draw a distinction between leadership and management, and as I have sort of watched supervisors in the past, I watched people who managed others, which meant they basically in some sense sort of controlled, tried to control, for performance, control for outcome, control for problems. And I just felt that when I tried that on, there was something about it that was uncomfortable for me.

And then it just sort of struck me that my job wasn't to stop problems from happening; my job was to make good things happen. And so it was: "How do I put those in our organization in the best position to make good things happen?" And in the process of trying to make good things happen, sometimes things will go wrong. And so I feel like I had to sort of go through this process of not being highly ego-invested in the issues, and not to personalize issues, so that if a mistake happened, it wasn't an affront to me.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: There was no reason for me to be upset, but it was more to figure out: so, what is it that we need to do to get ourselves in the direction that we want to go? And so I felt like it sort of evolved over time. And I think when I came to OSU, because of the unique condition of the institution, I had to be highly sensitive to the kind of fear that people had gone through, and that they were still holding onto, and that judgment could increase the degree to which a person felt at risk. At-risk people don't venture out. They don't think beyond their own personal safety, and so as a result, they can't really think about: "How do I act on behalf of the well-being of others?" They're just obsessed with: "How do I keep myself safe?" And generally that's by not taking any risks. [0:25:00] And you can't innovate, you can't create, without taking some risks.

So for me, I felt like I had to sort of adjust my style, and become—certainly not less judgmental. I had to become more reflective, more patient, because for me, there's sort of an urgency to things, but, it's like, careful about how you put that urgency, thrust that urgency on others, because again, of what it does to them. And so I felt like I became more of a listener. I share with students at the end of my experience. I think that one of the things that I think happened for me was that I felt like I really tried to sort of turn myself over to the organization, and to let them shape me into the kind of leader that they needed, as opposed to coming and saying, "Here's the kind of leader I'm willing to be, or capable of being. Take me or leave me."

There are, I think, many forms that were accessible to me, and I had to sort of allow myself to find the one, or to be shaped into the one that was going to best work for this organization. And so one example of the way that I think that showed up was when we created for ourselves our "Campus Compact" in our organization, and that was really, literally, just sort of an open call to anybody in our organization. Anybody who wanted to participate was invited to, and was given permission. They didn't have to ask for permission from their supervisor to participate in helping to figure out what our contribution would be to the mission of Oregon State University, and in that process I facilitated the process, which meant that none of my ideas got on the paper. I just listened. I just recorded. I just tried to capture what was residing within the organization. Then I would go back and I would type it up, and I would send it back out, and say, "Here's what I got," and we'd have the next conversation.

And ultimately, through an organic process, we wrote a document that was called the "Campus Compact," which was a statement of our vision, values, and commitments. And I tell people it was—for me, it was a marvelous document, and I can say that because it didn't represent any of my thinking, that it was really about appreciating the brilliance that resided within the organization.

JD: And what was the time period that this occurred?

LR: We started it about four months after I arrived here, yeah. One of the things that was really clear was that the organization needed to be in a relationship with each other, and that the pathway that I saw to that was through conversation, of trying to create an organization-wide conversation, where people began to share with each other their hopes, and that we would translate those hopes into concrete commitments that we were willing to make, and actions.

JD: Mm-hm. That might be sort of a good topic to focus on. Another part of your Vice Provost role, it seems to me, is that you're both dealing with very big-picture, long-range planning, as well as kind of the day to day.

LR: Yes.

JD: So maybe talk about how—it seems to me the "Campus Compact" would be big-picture.

LR: Yes.

JD: But then, how did you go about implementing that?

LR: Yeah. Again, this another part of a leadership approach that evolved out of that, was that we sort of came up with a few sort of grounding principles within our compact, and one of those was that we would follow the energy, and that we would not appoint people to things. That was a part of the philosophy during the entire time that I was there, that if there was something that mattered for the success of our organization, we would find out who had the energy to move it forward, and we would allow those people with the energy to do that. And so we, at the end of our process, had identified some initiative areas that we wanted to pursue, and we just asked, "So who's got the energy to do this? Who's interested?" And we've had these broad cross-sections of people who came together to create these work groups, these—we called them "initiative groups." And the initiative groups then created plans.

It was very clear, in our conversations, that those would be the priorities for resources, so we would put our resources toward those things that were identified by our organization as the highest priorities. So the kinds of things that came out of it was a focus on assessment [0:30:00], a focus on diversity, a focus on community-building, and particularly a focus on creating greater community among students. And so the initiative was to create a first-year experience, or an orientation program. We didn't have a comprehensive, institution-wide one. So we now have this program called Connect. And the Connect program, that we still operate today, came out of out of one of those initiative groups. So we identified some

areas that we thought were really important for us, in order to enhance our—the success of our organization, and we did it through voluntary commitment, voluntary association.

JD: You were talking some about kind of becoming the vice provost that OSU needed, and there's also a dynamic going on between your professional work here, and then you're also very connected into a national Student Affairs network.

LR: Yes. Yeah.

JD: Talk about your involvement in the national organizations, and how that benefits both you and OSU, and vice versa.

LR: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I've tried to maintain a vibrant professional identity while I'm here, and while I've been here. And part of that is because—one is because I feel like I owe it to myself to consistently grow and learn, and that that knowledge will enhance what I do here on campus. But I also think that there's a generative responsibility that any professional has, that they have a responsibility to constantly nurture the growth of the professional community that gave birth to them—so a responsibility to give back to my profession, as a leader and a contributor. And so I feel like I've worked really actively to serve in service roles within the professional organization, not sought out sort of elected roles, and so I prefer to be more in sort of organic things, as opposed to positional leadership roles within the organization, though I have had some of those roles, as well.

But I still have—I also have this belief that your best work should always be on your campus, that there are some people who are highly involved in the professional organizations, and outside their campus, they have these wonderful reputations, and then you go to their campus, and they're absent. They're not engaged. I think that does a disservice both to your professional identity as well as your professional integrity, if your best work isn't being done on your campus, with those to whom you made a commitment to be a leader, to be a campus leader. And so I felt like I've benefited greatly from my professional involvement, and I feel like the network that I've had, and the ability to bring people from those networks here to campus to provide professional development for us, and to sort of nurture the growth and learning of our organization, has been a payoff in many ways.

JD: And through one of the national organizations, the NASPA, I know you were editor of their journal for a while.

LR: Yes, yes.

JD: And you've clearly done a lot of publishing.

LR: Yeah.

JD: What intrigues you about publishing? What's the importance of that?

LR: Yeah. Again, I think that one of the responsibilities that I have, that anyone might have, is to be a good citizen of the academy. And when you think about sort of the things that holds the academy together, it's teaching, research and service, and that in my professional role, I feel like I have a responsibility to model all of those things, and find ways to manage all of those things—and that in that role as a journal editor, they—for short, they call the association NASPA—for NASPA, it was a problem that I was handed. They wanted to move the journal from print to online. And so they asked me about, "Are you willing to be editor?" and if I would be willing to sort of take on that transition process. There's a whole community of scholars within NASPA who had no interest in having their journal go digital, because it was happening at a time that not many journals had made that move yet. [0:35:00]

And so the question is, "Well, how's this going to affect me in the tenure and promotion process, if I'm publishing on this online journal, and what does it mean?" So I took on this role of navigating the organization through that, and having many symposia, and conversations with faculty in that association, in order, ultimately, to get to that place where we moved it into a fully online journal. And I just enjoy writing myself. I mean, it is—again, like I said, activity of the mind, and just the ability to take on a topic and to find ways to give form to it in a way that has value, or that possibly has value for others.

JD: And I know that there's been some pretty interesting innovations that have gone on with Student Affairs, and other things at OSU, and I'm assuming that allows you a way to communicate perhaps some cutting-edge ideas or practices.

LR: Yeah. Yeah, I think in our Student Affairs organization, again, for a resource organization that's under-resourced, I think that we've innovated a lot, and I think there are a number of things that we've done that people around the country look at, or looked at particularly at the time when we were doing them. Like for example, when I said that we started—in 1996, we had our first assessment committee. Well now, assessment is this huge issue in higher education. Well, we were on that path way before many other people, and so as a result we created a structure for it, and created sort of an organizational learning community around that, and the pathways for that, way before others were thinking of doing those kinds of things.

But I think even in our work with students, we've done some—I think some pretty successful innovation, though I think that that, particularly using other mediated forms of communication, learning, is a place where there still is much more growth to happen, because that is one of the areas that requires significant resource investment. And one of sort of the final things that I did in the role, before I transitioned out of it, was to hire somebody in charge to do Student Affairs communications and marketing, with the communication really high in terms of digital-mediated communication with students.

JD: So I think one of the important aspects of any institution is its leadership, or perhaps specifically the top leader in a university.

LR: Mm-hm, yeah.

JD: That's the president. And you ended up serving under four, if we count Tim White, who was interim at a critical period.

LR: Yes.

JD: So I would like to kind of go through, perhaps in sequence—

LR: Okay.

JD: —the presidents, because I'm assuming they affect the campus culture and the focus of the institution.

LR: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JD: So if you would start, perhaps, with John Byrne?

LR: Yeah, well, obviously he was the president who hired me, who at least authorized Roy Arnold, the Provost, to hire me. So I only worked with John for a year, because when I came on board he had actually already announced his retirement. And so John was—sort of struck me as this, as I worked with him, the sort of pillar, someone who was—had this sort of incredible strength and integrity, and had been a really important guidepost in leading the institution through a very, very difficult time, and who came in as still very resolute in his belief in what this university was about.

And his leadership, and the guidance he gave to others, was really about sort of this quiet strength, that we had a responsibility to be strong for the communities that we served, and we had a responsibility, at the same time, to be human. [Laughs] And so that we needed to sort of let people know that we didn't necessarily have all of the answers, but to show a deep commitment to creating and solving and issues. So I think we was very action-oriented, and he was very committed to sort of being a big—[0:40:00] stabilizing the institution, and ensuring its success.

JD: Mm-hm. And he had been on faculty here for a long time.

LR: Yes, yes, mm-hm.

JD: And so then with the hiring of Paul Risser, that was someone very much outside the institution.

LR: Yes. Yes, he was. And Paul was—he was actually very pivotal for me. In fact, it's interesting. I just sent his widow a note the other day, just reinforcing how important Paul was in my life as a leader. He had this—it's funny. Coming

from Oklahoma State, he had this sort of almost cowboy kind of mentality and approach. There weren't a lot of sort of boundaries for him. He was about action. It was about, sort of, "Who do I go to get things to happen?"

And I think it frustrated some people who really wanted order, and really wanted sort of somebody to follow—people to follow a path, and that there was a sort of a hierarchy, there's a chain of command. Whereas, a simple example of, he didn't like the logo on some of the motor vehicles and stuff. He didn't like that, so he just went right to somebody, and said, "Can you do something different with the logos?" He just sort of saw some people over in the motor pool and stuff. They got together with I don't know who else, but they just changed the logos on the vehicles [laughs] because he—whereas, well, he should have gone through trademarks, and marketing, to make sure that it was consistent with identity and all that, but that was the way he was wired.

And the most consistent question I can remember hearing from Paul was, "So, Larry, so what's the right thing to do?" And that sort of always struck me, that at the bottom of all of what he was doing was his sense of ethic, that as an institution, that there's sort of a right thing for us to do. What is the right thing to do, as opposed to what's the easiest thing to do? Or, what would be the thing that would cause us the less problem—the least amount of problems, or anything like that? Paul was also a person who was sort of constantly agitated, and I don't mean "agitated" in a negative way, but intellectually agitated. He was always thinking about the next thing, and he was always sort of out there, in terms of thinking beyond what's happening now, and sort of mapping out plans. He would just sort of jot things on the side of something, or you'd get an email from him with this: "I was thinking about this, and what do you think about it?" And he honestly wanted to know. And he was the kind of person you could get in and mix it up with.

I once described him to somebody. I said Paul was the kind of person who you would get sort of this very consistent kind of response to him, that you could go to him and say, "Paul, I just want you to know that the Radiation Center just blew up." And he would say, "Oh, that's too bad. Oh, that's unfortunate. What are we going to do?" Or you would say, "Paul, a donor just came and gave the university \$100 million." "Oh, that's really swell." So it was sort of like—there wasn't a lot of ups and downs, at least I didn't experience a lot of ups and downs with him. There was sort of this evenness, which, for me, said: you can go to him, you can give him bad news, and his question is, "Okay, so where are we going? What are we going to do?" Not, "Who is the bonehead who caused that?" or, "What's the problem?" So he didn't sort of go on an attack mode first. It was always in this sort of, "Okay, so what's the next leadership step for us?" and doing that. And I really, really appreciated that.

I think that there were some things that got him in trouble with faculty, because again, I think he was just sort of—and in some people, he was all over the place. But there was not—he wasn't all over the place without a plan. I mean, he clearly had a vision, because he would always say, "Oregon State University." He would never say—he wouldn't say, "OSU." For him, it was always about Oregon State University. And he had a plan for how he wanted to position us in the state. He was ready to put on the boxing mask, boxing gloves, when it came to the U of O, whatever, because for him, it was about, "Okay, if this is an arena, then how do I make us central in it? If you all want to cooperate [0:45:00], fine, but if it's a competition, then let's go at it."

He was the one who decided that being losers in athletics was not okay. He wanted a new—he knew we needed to start with a new athletic director. He knew that we needed to start, in terms of looking at coaches. And I can recall meeting with him to talk about the finalists for the athletic director, and there was one person who had this tremendous amount of experience at a school as an athletic director, and then the person we ended up hiring was this sort of younger person, who had not been an athletic director, and who had been—but who'd been sort of a "next-to" associate in an athletic department. I remember people just really making this case for the more experienced person, saying, "Well, this person—they know the job, they've been athletic director." And Paul looked at them and said, "If this guy was any good, he wouldn't have been at this place for so long." [Laughs] "If he was any good, somebody would have hired him away from there." [Laughs]

JD: Interesting perspective.

LR: Just, I mean, immediately, he just sort of cut through all of that, and said, "This is the guy who can make some things happen. This guy's been sitting for a long time; he hasn't made anything happen where he is. What leads us to believe that he's going to make something happen here?" That was sort of his: "Who's going to make something happen?" approach to selecting people. And Paul is the one who sort of embarked us on, "We've got to turn the enrollment around. We need to

professionalize our enrollment-management areas. We need to think about things." And so he really, I think, set us on a course to recovery from all of the things that had happened to the university.

JD: Mm-hm. And then, as all university presidents do, they move on. And Tim White stepped in, in an interim role, and I understand the two of you had a close professional relationship.

LR: Yes, yes.

JD: And so even though he wasn't here for a while, perhaps talk about what his tenure in that post was.

LR: Yeah, it was interesting. I had chaired the search committee that hired Tim as the Provost, in that role, so we had a close relationship prior to that. And the way he came into the role was really interesting, because Paul left to move to a position at the University of Missouri system. I think people didn't know that Paul was going to leave, and so he ended up coming in the position—in fact, I mean, I was the—and I don't know whether this should be on film or not, but I was the person who Paul told that he was leaving. I was supposed to actually leave that next day, to go to NASULGC, National Association of State University Land Grant Colleges, meeting in Chicago, and Paul suggested that I not leave. He said, "Everybody else is going to be away." He says, "And now I'm going—it's actually going to be announced tomorrow that I've accepted this role, and I would like for somebody to be on campus to help manage dynamics, or whatever." And then so I said, "Fine, I'll stay. I don't know why me, but I'll stay."

And so Tim came into the position after a dust-up over what really was the university's financial situation. There had been sort of these large public conversations about there being an \$18 million, \$19 million hole that needed to be filled, and so, as a result, we were going to have to cut. And again, this was a university that—we had been through so much that the prospect of another cut was very unsettling to people. And so Tim came into the leadership role with that as the backdrop [laughs], or as the stage-setter. So he came in and immediately began to sort of convene campus conversations to talk about the budget situation, and to deal with the communication with our Vice President for Finance and Administration at the time, who had also sort of miscommunicated some things, and where there wasn't a great deal of trust. So he had to restore faith in a different way than after Ballot Measure 5, but he had to restore faith in the administration.

And the way that I think he did that was to launch OSU 2007, which was a strategic-planning process that was meant to be campus-wide [0:45:00], where we began to sort of chart what the university would look like, and particularly where we would want to be in the year 2007, which was only a few years away. And I think those conversations were very healthy, because it got people back in relationship with each other around where we were going, not where we were stuck. And it began to challenge us to make commitments about areas that we wanted to hold up as being sacred to the university's future, and worthy of our investment, and our energy.

And I think Tim did a really great job of being able to sort of facilitate those conversations. And it sort of fit in with what his style was, because I think he was someone who's very comfortable in the arena, and on the stage, and I think it allowed him to be able to give voice to some of the issues about which people were most concerned, and to sort of be that sort of public voice of the administration, in a way that began to give people confidence that we did care, and we were committed to ensuring that there was stability for folks.

JD: Mm-hm, mm-hm. And then after Tim, the current president, Ed Ray, was hired.

LR: Yes.

JD: And so, talk away on him.

LR: Yeah, I actually served on the search committee that hired Ed, and that, obviously, was responsible for being involved in helping with the Chancellor's Office to conduct the search. And the one thing that happened in our sort of negotiation with the state board and the Chancellor's Office was an agreement that whoever came in would just continue the movement of the strategic planning that was underway, that had begun under Tim, and that the person wouldn't come in and essentially change the direction of the university, but that someone who was willing to come in and validate the good work and thinking that was underway. And that's certainly what Paul did. I'm sorry—what Ed did was that when Ed came in, he immediately began to engage with the strategic planning process. He began to give voice to the priorities that had been set within it, and moved us very quickly to formalize it, because we had never—we hadn't had, at least in the

time I'd been here, a formal university strategic plan. And so we moved it all the way through to adoption, including many messy public conversations related to it.

The other thing that he did was to strengthen our institutional fundraising infrastructure. We had never had a capital campaign. The development and foundation staff that was here was really under-resourced. They were not engaged in the most dynamic relationship with the university necessary for them to really act as stewards of the university's public persona. So he immediately began this process of professionalizing that area, as well as alumni, the alumni area, realizing that, again, that's the window. That's the window to the university, and a window to the university's priorities and ambitions. And so I think building that and launching that, which then led to this energizing of the entire university enterprise. I think it began to help people inside to know that dreaming wasn't enough, but acting on them, and finding others to endorse them, was really important. And I think the idea that there was a brand identity to the university, and that that identity was something that we needed to embrace.

And so again, it was sort of this 'nother level professionalism of the university that had not been experienced before. [00:55:00] At least for me as a leader, it also created an environment where I felt comfortable planning. Prior to that, I felt very uncomfortable leading our organization through a strategic plan, because of the instability of the university. It felt disingenuous to plan, and then to know the next year, you're going to have to do that. So it actually stabilized the environment in a way that I say, as a leader, I now actually feel comfortable planning in this environment, because I feel like we're on a sustainable path, whereas previously, the university felt very unsustainable. And I think there's some things about today that, for people, would feel unsustainable, because of just the amount that everybody has to do, that individual performances don't feel, may not feel sustainable. But the question about the university's sustainability, I think, can be dismissed, because we are on a quite sustainable path.

I think the other thing that Ed did was he brought—in terms of our relationship with other external institutions and agencies—a spirit of collaboration, and a unifying spirit, to sort of connect us with PSU, and University of Oregon, and other institutions around the state, that we're all in this together, and what are the ways that we can sort of act on our shared interests and needs? And I think that was a really important dynamic that he brought to, that he brings to his leadership role. And obviously, again, our continued growth as a university, again, building on—Paul was the one who sort of initiated our e-campus, and our campus in Bend, and those kinds of things, but continued to expand those things and to strengthen those, and building on what was here. But again, adding a level of professionalism to it, and adding some energy that sustains it has been a really powerful influence that Ed has brought.

JD: You've mentioned a few times about the fact that OSU is a land grant college. Well, it's also a sea, and space, and—

LR: Sun.

JD: Sun. Yes, thank you. And I think there was certainly—well, an actual definition of what a land grant college was, when they were first formed. And it's still a land grant college, but there's been quite an evolution. What did you see, or interpret that as, when you came here? And then, how has that evolved through your tenure?

LR: Yeah. When I came—I mean, my core belief, and then there's parts of it that has not changed—is that the role of a land grant college is to be the gateway, or the pathway, to success, to the people with the least means, and to those who have dreams for a more successful life. And so I saw the land grant as being the place that was not going, quite frankly, to be the exclusive university, but more that it's the place that the children of day-to-day, hard-working, "I get paid by the hour" folks can go. And they could bring with them their dreams and their aspirations, and the people there will breathe life into them. I think that's still the mission, in my mind, sort of the translated mission of a land grant university.

But I think the question now is: "How do they serve this increasingly diverse array of people who represent U.S. society?" And I've consciously not used the word "citizen," because there are people within that who aren't U.S. citizens, but who are contributors, and builders, and architects [laughs], and on whom's back, backs, our society is still being sustained, and is being advanced. And so what role do land grant colleges play in providing access, and avenues of success, for their broad array of people? So I think there's a contemporary land grant mission that's yet to be fully articulated [1:00:00], but that is—but that for which there is accountability, in my mind.

JD: Mm-hm. Which, I think, leads into an important part of Oregon State University's history, which is perhaps the initial lack of diversity—

LR: Yes.

JD: —certainly reflected by the composition of the state population, to begin with. You've been very much a part of that transition. Can you talk a bit about both, just kind of broadly ways that you have helped facilitate changing the character of OSU?

LR: Yeah, yeah. The first thing I have to say is that—and again, I think I said it earlier, is that one of the things that attracted me to OSU was its quiet depth. And within that depth was a discernible humanity. And the reason that I decided that this was a place that I could live was the appreciation that I got for the decency of the people who are here, and that there are people here who recognize the challenging aspects of our nation's history, this institution's history, this community's history, but who want to rewrite that in a different way.

So for me, coming in, I felt like I have always carried this sort of responsibility of giving voice to diversity, and giving voice to the diverse needs, and hopes, and expectations, and well as to responsibilities that the campus has. And that ranges from direct involvement, and responding to incidents that may be seen as bias incidents, or humanity-threatening, dignity-threatening incidents, to those opportunities to transform the way that we act, or make decisions, that would reveal to people the depth of our commitment.

And so some of the examples, some of the kinds of ways that I think that's happened during the time that I've been here in relationship with others who've been, obviously, a part, very much a part of this work, can be related to our cultural centers and the way that we've expanded the role and the functioning of those, and in the process now of rebuilding the last two of four cultural centers—the creation of a Pride Center, to serve the needs of LGBT students in the community, as well as provide students in general with opportunities to learn about the experiences of the LGBT students. The consistent work of our women's center, and now the creation of the Ettihad Cultural Center, to serve the needs of Middle East students, and the creation of a covenant that basically said that the existence of the cultural centers, in whatever location they are, is guaranteed, and that the centers will only be moved through the decision of those served by the center.

So the university couldn't arbitrarily make a decision to move a cultural center. When we went through this process, there were people who wondered why we did it in the way that we did. And largely, the explanation I gave people was: because of the uniqueness of our history, sometimes institutions have to do some things that are almost heroic, to make a proclamation about who they are, and who they will be in the future, in the lives of particular populations. And I think our covenant is one of those examples of a document unlike anything I've seen anywhere else in higher education. Because I even told faculty; I said, "Nobody can guarantee you that you will have your office, and that you won't be moved without somebody else's decision, so we just don't make decisions about guarantees of space."

But I felt like this was such a sacred relationship, and such an important piece in defining our institutional character, that we had to do something at that level. So I worked with others to write that covenant, and then to vet it through the communities, and to get their input to ensure it. And then we did a formal signing ceremony [1:05:00] in the Memorial Union that involved university leaders, as well as the folks from the community, and student leaders in that role. All the way to: we changed the way that we do admissions, which is another one. And so we use something called the insight résumé, which looks—it's sort of a holistic admissions process, and it uses non-cognitive variables as a way of assessing ability of people that goes beyond traditional measures, such as ACT, and SAT, and whatever. And we were among the first institutions in the country to do that.

In fact, we've actually trademarked and licensed our document, and now sort of we make it available to other institutions. We have folks who actually go out and do training with others who want to adopt this. And again, it was based upon our goal of saying, "Are there ways that we can assess the ability of people from underrepresented backgrounds, that will give us insight into their potential to be successful, that would not be discerned if we just used traditional measures?" So, again, we had to go beyond. And it also, I think, it was really helpful that we did this before federal government got involved in saying—making decisions about the kinds of things that you could do to admit people from underrepresented backgrounds, particularly those from ethnic backgrounds and communities.

And so our holistic approach, I think, is a really innovative approach, and it's one of the ways that will allow us to move toward the contemporary land grant, because we have this way of being able to assess the potential for success in unique ways.

JD: Sure. And probably some of the history, some of the events—not necessarily comfortable events—

LR: Yeah.

JD: —that often had very kind of public display outside of the campus, particularly, I think, around racial issues?

LR: Yes.

JD: Talk a bit about your role in those, and the ways that one takes a very difficult, hurtful situation, and tries to build from that, or change from that.

LR: Yeah. So I can give you concrete examples of ways that I feel like I've had to interact with some of those kinds of situations. We had one situation where we had, again, a particularly disturbing racial incident, where an African American student was walking by a fraternity house, and people yelled racial epithets at him, and they threw things out the window at him. And it was very hurtful, because this was a student that—another racial incident had been directed at him outside a residence hall, where a person had attempted to do some things to him that were really pretty despicable.

And so as the Vice Provost, and as someone who saw in their role responsibility for enhancing the sense of community that we feel on campus, I had sort of twofold responsibility. One is, obviously, I met with the student who was the target of the incidents, to talk with him about resources, how he was feeling, what kind of supports he needed, ways that we would help him. And then what were sort of the resources, and the avenues that were available to him for recourse, and ways that we could help him to get through that? That same afternoon, I had to visit the fraternity house, and meet with the students there, and to ask them, "So, how are you doing? What are ways that I can be helpful to you?" My responsibility during difficult times is to be the Vice Provost for all students, and to lead in a way that holds the community together, and that helps us to find our best self in the outcome—and so that challenge of being on everybody's side during that incident, and ultimately, to facilitate community dialogue, and to facilitate community healing in that regard.

Another example was our student newspaper published an editorial called "The Muslim Double Standard," where again, they just went after Islam, and just said some things about the prophet Mohammad, and things that really created deep hurt for members of our community who practice the Muslim faith, but also for students who felt like that was not representative of their thinking and who they are. [1:10:02] And so the hurt wasn't restricted to the Muslim community.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: But as a process of trying to reconcile that, I pulled together some students from the Muslim community, and the editorial staff of the student newspaper, for a conversation on that. And my lead-in was that my hope for the conversation was that people would leave the conversation in better condition than they came in. That was the hope. And so we started off by saying, "Are there some things that we need to do here, to make sure that we create a space where we can talk, and that will lead us in that direction?" So we came up with just a couple of ground rules.

And so then I just asked them; I just said, "I'd like to just go around and ask all of you to talk about how it's felt to be you over the course of the last few days." So we started with the Muslim students, and they talked about just sort of the kind of hurt that they felt, and the betrayal that they experienced, and they believed that they had come to one kind of university, but then to have another kind of university show up in front of them—to talk about the insult, and the fear that came out of it. It's like, "What's on the other side of this? Is there violence, and whatever?"

Then, when I went to the staff of the student newspaper to ask them how it felt to be them, the editorial page editor—I didn't want the author there; I wanted the people who made the decision to publish it, not the person whose perspective. The editorial-page editor, he just—he literally had his arms wrapped around him. He says, "I can't talk right now." He was just so overcome with emotion. But the editor—I went to her, and I said, "So how's it feel to be you?" She said, "Well,

before I answer that, I want to ask Ali, when he sees the pictures of all the rioting that's going on in Europe right now, and all of the terrorism that's going on, what goes through his mind?"

Well, Ali's father was there, and just sort of went ballistic. I mean, he opened his briefcase, and he sort of had all these articles from the past. He said, "These are all the things that you've said about us in the past, and here's all of the horrible and mean things!" And Ali said, "Papa, Papa, we said we wouldn't do this." And so the father then just sort of closed the briefcase, and he walked to the other side of the—we were in a large lounge—other side of the room, and just sat with his back turned to our group, and we were just in a little circle of chairs. I said, "No." I said, "That wasn't the question. The question is: how does it feel to be you?" She says, "Well, I called my father and told him about all the stuff that's going on here, and all the criticism that I'm getting, And he told me, he said, 'Well, that's not your problem. That's theirs.' He said, 'These people come over here, and some of them really want wrap towels around their heads, or they wear sheets around their bodies, and they want us to accept them as if they're one of us.' He said, 'And they're not, and we need to remind them of that.'"

And then she—her mood shifted, and she says, "And it was after that conversation that I realized that I was not prepared to make the decision that I made." And she started to cry. [Laughs] And she said, "And I didn't mean to hurt anybody. I just, I need help, because I want to fix this." And Ali's father came over to the other side of the room. He said, "I have two daughters, and the most difficult thing for me ever in life is to see one of my daughters cry." He said, "And in this moment, you have become my daughter."

JD: Wow!

LR: And all of a sudden, the mood shifted, and it's like: so the question is, so where do we go from here? And so the editor of the paper, named DeeDee, and Ali said, "Let's work together. Let's write something different. Let's write a different story." And so they actually wrote something, and it's probably in the archives, because it was in the *Barometer*. It was something, and article that said, basically, I think, "When They Hand You Lemons." [Laughs] And it was talking about how you take a bad situation, and how you shift it, and the kind of learning that can come out of this. We then sponsored a week-long event called—I think that was really focused on demystifying Islam, where we had meals together, we did student panels, we did sort of open conversations. We did all sorts of things to help people to get a better sense of this.

So the responsibility is to take those situations, and to turn them into educational experiences that are [1:15:00]—the most powerful tool that we have at our disposal at the university is education, and the question is: how do we use that tool when we show up in forms that we don't want to represent who we are? So in order to get back to our best, we educate [laughs], because it's usually the absence of knowledge that causes us to show up at our worst. And so my role is to figure out how to always—the way I describe it is my job is to sort of manage the middle, that when there's a controversy, there's people who are polarized. My job is to stand in the middle, to hold up our mission, and say, "How do we resolve this issue in a way that allows us to come out of it being who we say we are, or getting closer to who we say we want to be, as opposed to choosing a side?" There are enough people who have roles here that their job is to name, "Okay, you violated this policy," "Yes, this is wrong," "No, this is against our editorial policy."

My job isn't to be the arbiter of rules and stuff. My job is to be the facilitator of community, and to figure out how do I get us closer to being a community? And then let others sort of come in with verdicts around whether the behavior was atrocious, or those kinds of things. It's difficult, because people want me to weigh in. They want me to choose a side. And I think it would be a violation of the real trust of my role for me to choose sides on issues, because ultimately what happens is you choose enough sides that nobody feels they can come to you, because you've—"Oh, you've now taken a stance against everybody's perspective on some issue." [Laughs] As opposed to being able to say, "Well, you can go and talk to him about anything. He's not going to necessarily take your side, but he'll hear you, and he'll ask how he can be supportive, or how he can be helpful." [Laughs]

JD: Mm-hm. That's an important distinction.

LR: Yes.

JD: Well, and just to talk about a couple more situations, I know there was the—and I've watched the YouTube of the "I, Too, Am OSU."

LR: Yes.

JD: That was very recent, or earlier this year. And I'm not quite sure—I know that you were involved in kind of what the students were doing, but I don't really know more about that. Maybe you could expand a little on that?

LR: Yeah. There are times when I make a decision that a particular issue isn't mine to lead around, because there's enough other energy, and I don't want to appropriate other people's leadership voice. And so the "I, Too, Am OSU" was a student initiative. It was a student voice. I participated in the march, at the back, because again, I wanted to show that I was following student leadership around that issue. I had a role in the administrative part of sort of how do we sort of investigate the incident, and the issues, and things like that. But the issue around sort of leading the community healing and stuff—students came up with an approach that they wanted to have represent them. And so my job was, as in many other cases, to follow, and to support that work, and not to appropriate it.

JD: And we'll assume that people will be watching this recording 50 years from now, at some other university anniversary, so perhaps just give a little bit of outline of what the issue was, and what the campaign was about.

LR: Yeah. Well, the issue was that there were a couple of cases on campus where there were blatant racist incidents, one with some notes being left in the women's center, attacking a woman of African descent, and targeting her; the other being some graffiti found on one of our classroom buildings that targeted Native Americans, or I say "apparently" targeted Native Americans, because while you have Native Americans, when you write something like that, you're targeting anybody who reads it, because you're trying to influence the thinking of everybody. So I think the mistake sometimes is people think, "Well, that was written to put down Native Americans," but what I tell students is, "First, they have to go through your attitude, to get to that 'nother person. [Laughs] So they have to make an assumption that you agree with them. So you're the first shot." So, but it named Native Americans as the target, though it targeted the whole community, in a way.

And so, students wanted to give the message that, "This is a community where everybody is welcome. [1:20:00] This is a place where everybody has identity and has voice, and should feel dignity and be respected." So they began this campaign, and it was similar to campaigns that had happened on other campuses. I think UCLA, Harvard, many other campuses had done that sort of "I, Too, Am—," which basically is to say that, "We are very much a part of this place, whoever we are, whatever shape we come in, that we're all a part of this place, and we want to reinforce that through our public presence." So it was a long walk across campus, stopping at each of the cultural centers, with people from the particular communities talking specifically, uniquely, about their experiences. And I think that there was just very great power in having students to be able to give that voice, and being able to—and say, "Whoever is here, there is an ethic of membership here, that whoever enrolls here, whoever is hired here, whoever participates in the life of this campus, somebody, is OSU."

JD: In our conversations prior to this recorded interview, you had commented that both the literal and figurative complexion of OSU had changed.

LR: Yes.

JD: And in a very personal way, you were part of that. You were one of the first African American administrators hired here.

LR: Yes, yeah.

JD: How do these issues play out both in your kind of professional and personal perspectives that you lived and bring?

LR: Yeah. The OSU that I see now was a hope for me. When I came here, I was completely aware of the absence of diversity, particularly absence of diversity in senior administration. Throughout my career here, I was keenly aware of the tables at which I sat, and the absence [laughs] of other people of color at those tables. And so I felt like I always tried to be very thoughtful about how I used that voice, used my voice, and how I used it to enhance our movement toward

a preferred future, and what kind of relationships I needed with my peers in order to do that. And I think that it's a real delicate issue, because personally I always felt a great sense of urgency around it. When you're living in a world that doesn't sort of bend to your ways of being, you have urgent feelings about, "How do I quickly get it there? How do I change the range of people around the table, and the diversity of people around the table in the institution?" But also realizing that for the people with whom you're in a leadership relationship, it's a journey, and there's this sort of notion that whenever people are on a journey, the most important thing that they need is good company.

And my challenge to myself was to be good company to my colleagues, on the journey to being a more diverse and more understanding university, which meant I had to be really thoughtful about, again, like I said earlier, about the way that I judged, the strength of the emotion that I communicated, though I was feeling things very deeply. What would be the impact of that emotion on other people's openness to learning, and their willingness to take risks in the conversation, and those sorts of things? And so I feel like it was really important to have a style that welcomed risk-taking and welcomed learning. And so I watched that happen over time, and people really did begin to make decisions based upon learning more and knowing more.

I think one of the really powerful things that happened recently—I don't know if I even told you about it—was that the Provost's Council issued an ethos statement about commitment to diversity, and about their personal commitments to lead. And it's a document that was put out that was signed by every member of the Provost's Council, that they signed at their fall retreat. [1:25:00] And that was sort of one of the things that I and a couple of colleagues began working on, and we proposed to the group. And I said, "Even on sabbatical, I'm willing to continue working on this," so while on sabbatical, I did some tweaks and sent back to the folks a copy, and then some other people did some final tweaks on it, and then at the retreat, which I was not at, they adopted it, and the Provost and others sent me copies of it and said, "We did it." And I think it was a real proud moment for that group, that they have a shared commitment around diversity, and leading in a way that demonstrates a commitment for the diverse ways of being within the organization, and moving the organization forward.

And so I think there's a particular temperament that's needed to lead, which for me involved a lot of impulse control [laughs], because you have these immediate, gut-level reactions, and visceral reactions, to particular kinds of things, but you have to sort of discipline yourself to ask, "Would that reaction be helpful in the long run?" It may be helpful for me emotionally in the moment, but would it be helpful for the organization?

JD: As you've been talking about some kind of more behind-the-scenes, "This is how we're going to conduct ourselves," that will shape the institution as it moves forward—but there's also been some kind of tangible, physical changes.

LR: Yes.

JD: And I'm talking about the residence halls.

LR: Yes. Yeah.

JD: Talk about that a bit, and the importance of that.

LR: Yeah, yeah. I think that there are two real highlights [laughs] in the residence halls. One is that when I arrived here, there were—we hadn't built a new residence hall in—it felt like a century [laughs], but literally decades and decades. So we had an opportunity because of, again, the growing enrollment, to build a new residence hall, and the challenge, always, is naming. And there were no major donors, and so we didn't feel like—there was no one who we needed to honor in that way, and so it became a question about how do we decide the naming of it? And it was really interesting. It came from a group of students and professional staff in our housing and dining area, sitting around, thinking about the new residence hall, and saying, "Wouldn't it be neat if we did research, and identified an early person of color who graduated from the university, in order to name the residence hall?"

And so they end up doing some research, and coming upon Carrie Halsell, who was the first African American female to graduate from the university. And when they went back through and looked through alumni records and everything, it just had, "Carrie Halsell." It had the year she graduated, and the only thing it had written on it was "colored." And so when she left here, I guess she worked for a while at Meyer & Frank, in Portland, but then ultimately moved to Oklahoma, and

then North Carolina, and spent her career as an educator, working in higher education. And so it was agreed, and we got the university's support to name Halsell Hall, first hall on campus named after a person of color. And then just this fall, we opened Tebeau Hall, which again was a student who experienced a great deal of racism while he was here. He had his education interrupted, and had to go through all sorts of things, but ultimately graduated. And so, again, it came from our Housing & Dining area, the folks there doing research.

And so part of what that realized, that helped me to see, was the responsibility of cultivating a mindset within the organization about honoring, and about things that we do that can demonstrate who we are as a culture. Another example is if you go to the rooms in our Memorial Union, you'll see many of them have cultural themes, and there was a conscious decision to begin to create rooms that would be spaces that students of color and others would go into, that would remind them. So we have an Asian/Pacific Island room, we have La Raza Room, we have African American conference room, and we have the Native American Conference Room.

So you go in there—the back story on that is that all of those rooms were designed by students, and so we felt that one of the ways that we also affect diversity is you give students the opportunity to be architects of diverse spaces. [1:30:00] So the students from our Human Design and Environment met with students from the cultural communities to get their ideas about what they'd want. Then they would have to go back and find culturally appropriate ways to represent what they were studying at class, to do that.

JD: That's great.

LR: So you have students working across culture, to create these spaces. So again, you take the issue, you elevate it to an educational issue, and it produces marvelous outcomes for our community.

JD: I hadn't heard that story at all. That's great! You mentioned that you came to Corvallis a couple of days before your interview. You've certainly had a family, raised a child here.

LR: Yes.

JD: So you've lived in Corvallis, as well as being part of Oregon State University. Just talk a little about how Corvallis, or "Mayberry" [laughs]—

LR: Yes.

JD: —has changed since you first drove into town until today.

LR: Yeah. I mean, it's also a more diverse place. I mean, I don't know the specifics of it, but it certainly is a much more diverse place. I've had the opportunity to work on some school district committees, as well as to work with community agencies, where you get to sort of serve people with some of the more profound needs, or you become aware of some of the particular needs of populations and certain groups. But then you can see the numbers in those groups are changing, as well as being involved with the United Way, and being a part of their needs assessment, and being able to figure out—see some of the needs of various communities, or needs for certain services and programs. So I think that's happened.

But also just even looking at the community charter that the city adopted, and there's sort of the statements about diversity, and the kind of place it wanted to be, having served on the Community Alliance for Diversity, and watching sort of local businesses, and watching the number of round tables and other things, and the commitment to really learn about things. And so I've seen it as a community that's continued to grow in its knowledge, and awareness, and response to diverse needs. I think Corvallis is a wonderful, wonderful community, and I can say that as somebody at my age. I'm not a young person, so I don't what they would experience, but I really find it a wonderful place, and I find it a place that's still energizing, in terms of its willingness to take on difficult issues.

JD: So we've been talking a lot of more serious issues, but I'm sure there's light moments and fun events, and perhaps more light interactions and events that you've had with students, or the campus over the years. Can you pick out a highlight or two?

LR: Yeah, well, it always starts with sort of my home organization, Student Affairs. At the end of every year, we do a Student Affairs celebration, and we pick a theme, but the theme is generally light and easy. And so this past theme—it was my last one, and the theme was "Rock, Rap, and Larry-oke."

JD: [Laughs]

LR: And so the people had to write songs, and do skits, and things like that, and it was very funny. And then the Student Affairs department heads, we will perform at some of them. We had a group that was called "The Vintage People," which was always really fun, to be able to write songs, and to sing, and be a part of that. In terms of student events, there's a lot of lightness, but there is just a tremendous amount of celebrating! And one of the real highlights for me are the cultural nights at OSU, and the opportunity to go and to meet—there are small ones, all the way from the European Night, which may have 70, because they do this seven-course dinner, to the Luau, which takes place in Gill Coliseum.

A few years ago, for India Night, the student who was emceeding it has this idea that he wanted me to do a cameo, and dance on-stage. [Laughs] So he was just talking, and so he set up this skit where he was talking and stuff, and then the music started playing, and then I had to sort of go out on the stage and sort of, by myself, just sort of do this little dance, and stuff like that! The other thing that was a real fun event was the first year that we did "Dancing with the Stars" on OSU.

JD: Do tell! [01:35:00]

LR: And I participated, and had to learn to do a foxtrot.

JD: And what was your dance? [Laughs]

LR: A foxtrot. Yeah, to "Singin' in the Rain." So it was certainly out of my comfort zone, but it was very fun. It was great to be able to work with students who were part of the dance community, and to be able to—just to be able to be in that situation with other faculty and staff, to be able to do something that would entertain, certainly entertain the community. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] Well, I noticed, in looking at some comments online upon your retirement as Vice Provost, they were addressed to everything from "Larry D" to "Dr. Roper."

LR: Yes.

JD: Which I thought kind of spoke volumes about what your relationship—or the span of types of relationships that you have on campus. You've clearly made a great mark on the institution, and as you were commenting that even though you were on sabbatical, you were kind of still working through some things that were important to you—how do you decide when to retire?

LR: It's funny that you ask that. The Provost, at the last retreat that I was going to be participating in, in the Provost's Council—we do fall retreats—asked me if I would sort of do a fireside chat with the Dean's Council, and just sort of talk about leadership, and what I experienced here, whatever. And that was one of the questions I got, was sort of, "Why did you decide to step aside?" And I said, well, it goes back to sort of my view of organizations and individual presence within organizations, which is based upon the approach that I had when I used to throw house parties, which was that when I got tired and was ready to go to bed, I would just start vacuuming. [Laughs] And that was people's signal that the party's over.

And so I said, "So my view is that I'd rather leave a party too early than stay too late," that I want to leave while it's still fun, and would love to have people the next day say, "Oh, we're sorry you left," or, "We missed you when you were gone," as opposed to, "We thought you'd never leave," and, "We had to break out the vacuum to give you the hint that the party was over." [Laughs] And so, for me, it just sort of was a point where I was still enjoying my job a great deal. I still have tremendous energy to educate. And I just saw this as sort of a natural time to make a transition.

JD: Mm-hm. So I've been the one asking the questions, but I want to give you the opportunity, if, as you've been talking or before the interview began, there were any topics that we haven't touched on, to give you the opportunity to bring up some things that are on your mind.

LR: Well, and hopefully this is—just one last thing, and hopefully this is something that would resonate with other people who've been a part of OSU. It's that I feel like often times, people will ask, "So how come you've been at OSU? Well, why'd you come here?" They'll ask you why you came, but they hardly ask you why you stay. And I tell people—so I tell students, prospective students, I say, "When you interview students who are here, you can miss the mark by just asking them, 'So why'd you come to OSU?'" Because we always have a choice about whether we stay in a place, and it's usually why somebody stays that's going to be the greatest attractor, or the greatest reason why you might want to think about, in terms of your decision.

And so I tell people that I stayed at OSU because I felt like I never tried to take it for granted that I got to work with good people, and that no matter what we went through, in terms of the challenges, I just always had this sense of confidence, that whoever I was at the table with were going to be good people, and that they were going to be operating with a sense of selflessness. They were going to be other-centered as they think about things. And occasionally you run into somebody who is just only out for themselves, but overwhelmingly, people here are other-centered. And that, for me, was something that made it very easy to approach my work with confidence, and knowing that I could look forward, as opposed to me looking over my back, looking behind my back, wondering what's going on back there, or what do I have to fear? I felt like I could really sort of eagle-eyed focus on, "How do we help move things forward?" knowing that the people round you were committed to the same thing.

JD: Mm-hm. That seems like a perfect ending point. Thank you so much for your thoughts.

LR: Well, thank you so much, Jan. [1:40:06]