

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD ROPER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins the third interview session with Richard Roper, on October 16, 2019, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for coming back today. I appreciate it.

Richard Roper: My pleasure.

SI: We want to focus, in this session, on your work on different advisory councils and other similar boards at different institutions of higher education around New Jersey and also in New York. It seems, if I am looking at the dates correctly, the earliest one was your work on the advisory council at the Woodrow Wilson School. [Editor's Note: The Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, formerly the Woodrow Wilson School, changed its name in 2020, after the Princeton University Board of Trustees voted to remove Wilson's name because his "racist thinking and policies make him an inappropriate namesake for a school or college whose scholars, students, and alumni must stand firmly against racism in all its forms."]

RR: That's not the oldest. I think I did that from '98 to 2010 or '12. That was an appointment that is based on one's familiarity with the Woodrow Wilson School and one's engagement with the public affairs community, either at the state, regional, national or international level. The advisory committee met on a yearly basis. Each meeting was about three days in length, beginning with a breakfast, followed by a series of discussions with faculty of the Woodrow Wilson School, a session that the advisory council had with the dean, and then a concluding session, at which the advisory council came to some conclusion about either its contribution to the school through its advice and/or raised questions about how it should proceed going forward. We were concerned about the breadth of the school's academic program, educational program for both undergraduates and for graduate students, and we also focused on issues like inclusion, diversity, financial help, breadth of engagement with other components of Princeton University, the History Department, the Psychology Department, the Sociology Department, the Office of Population Research. We were quite active. I really enjoyed the ten-year period that I spent with that council, because the people were, first of all, very knowledgeable about the world of public affairs. Some were former cabinet members in previous presidential administrations. I remember, it wasn't Jimmy Carter's press secretary; it must have been Bill Clinton's press secretary [Mike McCurry] who served as a member, as did a couple of generals who were still serving in the military, a couple of university presidents, the president of Hunter College was on the panel. A very distinguished group. I was proud to be a part of it, and we did serious work. I guess that's about it.

SI: Do any of the particular challenges that you faced stand out in your memory?

RR: We built a pretty good relationship with the dean of the school. Anne-Marie Slaughter was dean for the last six years of my tenure on the advisory council. The dean before her, I can't remember his name; until Anne-Marie, all the deans had been male. She was very supportive of the council and its work, especially because our opinion about where the school was and the progress that was being made helped inform the Robertson Advisory Board, which was responsible for overseeing the Woodrow Wilson School's endowment. Since that body had two members of the Robertson family on it, one of whom who always served as chair of the committee, it was very important that our work supported or informed the work of the

endowment advisory committee because they were particularly interested and concerned about the school's continuing commitment to the public sector, to public affairs, and particularly to international affairs. While I was on the advisory board, there was no controversy about how the school was using the endowment. After I left the advisory board, there did come a time when that became a central issue, leading to a court battle involving the family of the original contributors to the school's endowment and ultimately resulted in the foundation advisory board being disbanded, a portion of the endowment being given to a newly-created foundation by the family, much smaller than the endowment that remained with the school. I was interviewed during that process, but I was not on the advisory board when it happened.

SI: Was there any controversy over changing the name during your time there?

RR: That never arose. That was never an issue. That was not a prominent consideration by the students or the alumni when I was a student at the Woodrow Wilson School. What we were concerned about was whether the money had come from the CIA, and many of us thought that that was the case. It proved not to be the case. When I worked at the Wilson School, that was not an issue any longer because by then, the Robertsons had been identified as the source of the original sixty-two million dollars that by the time the legal battle arose had increased to six hundred million dollars. As I said before, after I left the advisory board, that issue became a hot one, that is, how the school was using the resources and the extent to which it was continuing to be committed to the public sector and especially the international affairs arena.

SI: Okay. I was wrong before. Your time at the Gateway Institute at Kean University preceded that.

RR: That was probably one of the first. The Gateway Institute was, in my view, a not-very-serious attempt by Kean University to raise its profile with Essex and Union Counties with respect to addressing issues that were a particular concern to the leaders of those two counties. It was not very successful in my view, because it wasn't able to generate very much financial support from the two counties that it wanted to assist, I think largely because the counties didn't take the enterprise seriously. There were some attempts to create internships and to foster enhanced discussions about job creation in the two counties, but we didn't make a substantial contribution in either of those areas.

SI: Okay. This is a little bit different, but you were also on the Board of Directors of the Association of Black Princeton Alumni for about twenty years.

RR: That's correct, I surely was.

SI: What were the goals of that organization, and how would you define your work with them?

RR: Yes, ABPA [Association of Black Princeton Alumni] was and still is very active in raising issues that impacted the quality of the undergraduate and graduate experience for Black students at Princeton University. We sponsored conferences. We convened meetings with students. We organized activities that generated funds for the university. We helped in the selection process of entering freshmen. Our conferences were pretty substantial, one of which and the one that I'm

most familiar with was the conference at which Black entrepreneurship was the featured topic and I had been asked to solicit the involvement, in fact as keynote speaker, of Robert Johnson, the founder of BET, Black [Entertainment] Television, who had been a classmate of mine as a graduate student at the Wilson School, and I was successful in doing that. Bob came and made a terrific speech. I think at a recent conference that stems from the conference sponsored by ABPA, this recent conference was called Strive. Some 1,200 Black alumni of the undergraduate and graduate schools were in attendance. There are a total of about five thousand Black undergraduate alums, so that 1,200 was a substantial share of that group. Spent three days at Princeton. The lead speaker was Michelle Obama, who was not in attendance, her brother was, both of whom attended Princeton as undergraduates. She, however, made a video presentation, and the focus of her talk was the need for Princeton alumni to be very much engaged in giving back, if you will, not necessarily the university but to the communities from which they came. It was a terrific conference, one of the best conferences I've ever attended. I was there for only one day, but that was good enough for me. I think I told you that I had helped Michelle Obama, okay, so I won't go back over that. I was very proud of that relationship. My stint with ABPA was almost twenty years, and I felt that that was probably long enough. I've been on boards that have extended over fifteen or twenty years in several instances, and I've always felt that twenty years doing anything, except my job, is more than enough.

SI: In 1993, you joined the Advisory Council on Undergraduate Education at Rutgers?

RR: Correct.

SI: How did that come about?

RR: I'm trying to remember who recruited me to that, and I don't think I can recall. This entity was based in New Brunswick. The one previous, I think, appointment to a New Brunswick or a University-wide activity was my recruitment to serve on the Board of Overseers, the [Rutgers University] Foundation Board of Overseers, and I did that for ten years. [Editor's Note: The board is now known as the Rutgers University Foundation Board of Directors. In 2021, the University decided to stop the use of "overseers" in light of the acknowledgement and abandonment of language tied to racial inequalities.]

It was while I was serving on the Board of Overseers, I think, I was asked to take on a role with the Advisory Committee on Undergraduate Education, the focus of which was trying to determine how to maximize student engagement with the businesses in and around the University, whether it was in Newark, in Camden or New Brunswick, so that those students might get internships and then subsequently get employment at local businesses and private enterprises, private companies. I chaired that board for several years. I can't remember exactly how many. I think we were reasonably successful in promoting Rutgers undergraduates as interns at Johnson & Johnson, at other pharmaceutical companies in the state, at Prudential, at PSE&G in Newark, at Campbell's Soup in Camden, et cetera. The conversations that we had leading up to the establishments of those internships were with officials at the private companies to determine exactly what they were looking for in the form of skills and knowledge if they were to engage our students as interns. In turn, the advisory board then shared that information with the leadership of the University to inform the coursework that students were taking and would

take, if you will, if the leadership felt that internships were important and they did. So, it had an impact.

SI: The Rutgers University folks you were working with, was it mostly from the Business School or from all over?

RR: No, this was central administration.

SI: Central administration, okay. Did you have a sense of how the faculty reacted to what you were trying to get across?

RR: I think it was positive because several members of the faculty were invited to address the advisory board to give us suggestions about how our work could be beneficial to the students, and we, in turn, gave them advice on how their coursework could be made more relevant to what the business community was particularly interested in, not in terms of the discreet subject content, but rather skills that would allow young people to work in teams, to communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing, things of that nature.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your work with the Board of Overseers at the foundation. What did that entail?

RR: Well, that was intended to and still is intended to be the University's principal outreach and support of the foundation's fundraising, building the endowment. At that time, the University was not really that engaged, quite frankly, in building an endowment. So, we were not very professional, I don't think, as an enterprise. Several of the overseers were very supportive of the University financially, and they had high visibility as a part of the enterprise, but the rest of us were partially helpful in generating funds for the University. The foundation didn't really become serious until, I think, in the administration of president--oh, my goodness ...

SI: McCormick? [Editor's Note: Richard L. McCormick served as the president of Rutgers University from 2002 to 2012.]

RR: McCormick, yes. McCormick's tenure was the beginning of a real serious effort to professionalize the foundation and to really make a serious attempt to build the endowment. Over the last several years, that has been reasonably successful, because in the past year, the endowment for the first time reached the billion-dollar mark. It's a little bit over a billion dollars now, but it's still one of the smallest of the university foundations of the Big Ten schools.

SI: Yes, you didn't quite have the same role at Princeton, but you have these two very polar opposite approaches towards fundraising.

RR: No question about it.

SI: Yes. Was that part of what you tried to get across? Were you ever advocating that, "We've got to change things a bit to be more like this model"?

RR: No, we really weren't that focused on professionalizing the foundation. We were more interested in helping to identify organizations and businesses that might be encouraged to provide financial support. We weren't really focused on getting the alumni, for example, seriously engaged in the fundraising enterprises like a lot of places, like Princeton and Harvard and Yale do, or even Berkeley, for that matter, or Michigan. I don't really think we had the professional infrastructure to take on an assignment of that type, although that was clearly what was needed. But when McCormick came, perhaps based on his experience at the University of Washington, where he had been prior to coming to New Jersey ... [Editor's Note: A phone rings.]

SI: Let me pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

RR: The foundation's president was recruited based on his ability to build a professional organization and to attack the issue of engaging the University's hundreds of thousands of alumni.

SI: Okay. Were you there when they kind of restructured that, or did your tenure end?

RR: I was not there then.

SI: You were on the undergraduate council until 2004. You also were involved, this is going back a little bit, in something called Project Grad in Newark?

RR: Yes, that was a Ford Foundation-supported initiative that was focused on helping to strengthen the education reform movement in Newark. The attempt was to bring to Newark experts in the field of education, pedagogy, education administration, who could provide counsel, if you will, about how Newark might improve the delivery of secondary education to the students enrolled in the public schools. I think I served on that for a couple of years, not that many. Project Grad no longer exists. It was in place for about five or maybe eight years, but I was not on it the full tenure.

SI: Did that have any relation with the higher education community in Newark, or was it was all focused on secondary education?

RR: All focused on secondary education.

SI: Do you think it met some of its goals? How would you rate the work you did?

RR: Well, I think it brought to light some of the things that were being implemented successfully in other places like Philadelphia and Chicago, and I think it probably informed work being done by some educators in Newark. It could have contributed, and I think it did, to the creation of--what is it called? I can't remember the name of the project that's now still in place at a couple of schools in Newark, at Peshine Avenue [School] and at Avon School and I think also at one of the high schools. It was South Side; it's now Malcolm X Shabazz. Those places incorporated some of the recommendations being offered that were generated by Project Grad.

The name of the project at Peshine and Avon, is--it'll come to me at some point, but I can't remember right now.

SI: You can put it in the transcript.

RR: Okay.

SI: In 2000, that was when you did the self-study at Seton Hall Law School.

RR: At the law school, right. That's a traditional self-study, where you get presentations from the dean and the faculty about the philosophy of the law school, the progress it has made in achieving the goals articulated in its previous strategic plan, where they are in terms of student performance on the exams they take for being certified to practice law in the state.

SI: The bar.

RR: The bar exams, of course. The status of its finances, its fundraising apparatus, the effectiveness of its fundraising, to a lesser extent, its relationship to the community in which it's located, et cetera. We were presented with that information. We then shared that information with the accrediting organization that was on site and with which we were related. It was an official enterprise. I think it was helpful to Seton Hall and I was proud to be a part of it.

SI: For these other institutions that you had not been previously associated with as faculty or alumni, how do you think you came to be tapped for these roles?

RR: Good question. In some instances, I suspect it was because I was perceived as an active contributor to the public discussion on issues of economic development, community development, social justice, education reform. I was involved in any and all of those areas. It was assumed that I could bring, if not a lot of expertise, a perspective that would be helpful to the institutions, as they attempted to do things that were meaningful either for their students or for the community in which they were located. I interacted with some of the officials at those schools prior to being asked to participate on their advisory boards. The dean of the Seton Hall Law School and I had worked on a project together. That's the guy who is currently the Athletic Director for Rutgers University, Pat Hobbs. I had served as the executive director of something called Newark in the 21st Century, a task force that looked in 1998 and 1999 toward where Newark should be preparing to go as the year 2000 approached. I led the task force as the staff director, and Pat Hobbs assisted me in that work. The activity was housed at Seton Hall Law School, so that's where he and I got to know each other. [Editor's Note: Patrick E. Hobbs has served as the Athletic Director of Rutgers University since 2015. He served as the dean of Seton Hall Law School from 1999 to 2004.]

I'm trying to remember who I knew at Kean University. I had worked with Susan Lederman, who had been the longest-serving president of the New Jersey League of Women Voters and who spent a year as a visiting fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School when I was director of the Office of Newark Studies there. I got to know Dick Nathan, who hired me to head the Princeton Program for New Jersey Affairs and who subsequently became the director of the Rockefeller

Institute of Government at SUNY Albany, who got me involved with SUNY Albany as a result of my work with him at the Princeton Urban and Regional Research Center, which he headed while a faculty member at the Woodrow Wilson School. So, that explains some of it. I also served on the advisory board to the provost of Rutgers-Newark ...

SI: Was it Diner or Samuels? [Editor's Note: Norman Samuels served as the provost of Rutgers-Newark from 1982 to 2002. Steven J. Diner served as the chancellor of Rutgers Newark from 2002 to 2011.]

RR: Steve Diner.

SI: Okay.

RR: ... Providing advice and counsel about the campus's relationship to Newark, its institutions, its people, and things of that nature. Nothing that had to do with the academic side of the campus, but more its relationship to the community and to the students in surrounding community.

SI: Can you talk a little bit more about that? I know Steve Diner was an urban historian. That was one of his main priorities to make Rutgers-Newark more a part of the Newark community. Do you remember any initiatives in that regard or how successful you think those efforts were?

RR: I think he tried hard to beef up the EOF [Equal Opportunity Fund] program as one of his contributions. He wanted to build a stronger relationship with the Newark Public Schools and made some attempts to do that, both through NCAS [Newark College of Arts and Sciences] and through the law school, particularly through Paul Tractenberg's work at the law school. He wasn't very successful, I don't think, in building a relationship with City Hall in Newark, and I think it had as much to do with a reluctance on the part of his faculty to get too engaged with the Newark community. With the establishment with the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, there came an opportunity to strengthen the University's research relationship with the Newark metropolitan region, but it was not successful early on because the first person hired to be the executive director of the Cornwall Center was a bit impolitic in his relationship to City Hall, often commenting in the press about the deficiencies of the Sharpe James administration. So, that produced some tension. Steve tried to minimize the negative impact of the executive director, whose name escapes me at the moment, but it wasn't very successful. There was a charged relationship that Steve wanted to lessen, but that didn't work. [Editor's Note: The Joseph C. Cornwell Center is a part of the School of Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers-Newark. Sharpe James served as the mayor of Newark from 1986 to 2006.]

SI: In what other ways would the provost utilize the advisory committee? Is there anything specific that you remember working on with the provost's office?

RR: No, aside from helping to strengthen the EOF program, calling into question the quality of the leadership of the enterprise, trying to generate additional resources for the EOF program that were not state derived by generating, frankly, some financial support from students who had

been EOF recipients who had gone on to careers in both the public and the private sector. We did a little of that on behalf of the program, providing suggestions about the kinds of things that the Cornwell Center might address. I don't think there was much more than that.

SI: You were on that advisory committee during the time when Governor McGreevey and also Dr. Vagelos on the Board of Governors tried to orchestrate a merger that would have affected all the three campuses. Do you remember that being an issue that was at least discussed? [Editor's Note: In 2002, Governor James McGreevey appointed the Commission on Health Science, Education, and Training, chaired by Dr. P. Roy Vagelos, retired President, CEO and Chairman of Merck, who served on the Rutgers Board of Governors from 2002 to 2004. The committee was charged with reorganizing the state higher education system. The plan that emerged from their work, known as the Vagelos Plan, recommended merging Rutgers University, the New Jersey Institute of Technology and UMDNJ and creating three public research universities in the northern, central and southern regions of the state. A Review, Planning and Implementation Steering Committee, also chaired by Dr. Vagelos, began meeting in January 2003 to take steps to implement the plan, but these efforts collapsed by December of that year.]

RR: No, that didn't come up. I mean, it didn't last long enough to, quite frankly, be taken seriously. It was not well received. The concept, the idea, of merging parts of UMDNJ, if not the entire thing, with Rutgers, was fought, I think, strenuously by the legislature. Indeed, when Governor Christie revived the idea, he did not go through an advisory body, I don't recall. Yes, he did, yes, he did. There was an advisory board because the president of Princeton was the chair of that body, if I'm not mistaken. They proposed a complete merger of Rutgers and UMDNJ. Governor Christie was able to push it through the legislature in spite of opposition coming from segments of the state, in particular the Essex County delegation and I think the Camden County delegation, but I know that the Essex County delegation fought it strenuously because of their concern about their political influence being reduced at UMDNJ, which was based in Newark, if the merger were successful. [Editor's Note: Chris Christie served as the governor of New Jersey from 2010 to 2018. In 2013, Rutgers merged with the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ).]

SI: A lot of these boards, there was crossover between the Lawrence administration and the McCormick administration. Do you have any, in general, thoughts on both of those presidents' different styles, different roles?

RR: I was not a fan of President Lawrence. I didn't think he was the right person to lead a University of this size. I didn't think he was sufficiently aware of and appreciative of the other campuses, in particular Newark and Camden. I thought he was too New Brunswick-centric. I think that comments he made while president exacerbated that as a problem for me. I didn't think the Board of Governors did enough to encourage him to be more inclusive, and I was not sad when he stepped down. He came to Rutgers from Tulane, a small private university in the South, and his sensibility simply did not seem to be consistent with those of the head of a major urban university. [Editor's Note: Before his Rutgers presidency, Francis J. Lawrence served in several administrative positions at Tulane University, his last being Chief Academic Officer and Provost. Lawrence served as the president of Rutgers from 1990 to 2002. In 1994, at a meeting with thirty faculty members on the Camden campus, Lawrence said, "The average SAT for

African-Americans is 750. Do we set standards in the future so that we don't admit anybody with the national test? Or do we deal with a disadvantaged population that doesn't have that genetic hereditary background to have a higher average?" The statement sparked protests and demands for his resignation.]

I thought McCormick, President McCormick, made an attempt to change the tone and to deepen the University's appreciation of its three campuses. I don't think he gave equal weight to New Brunswick, Newark and Camden, but I thought he did a better job of identifying the strengths of the other campuses. I think he did a terrific thing when he created Rutgers Future Scholars, the program that identifies seventh graders enrolled in the public schools of the communities in which the university has campuses. That's Newark, New Brunswick, Piscataway, Camden and a couple of other communities were added because they made financial contributions to be included. These seventh graders are identified, and then through the support and assistance of the University's administration in New Brunswick, they work with the school districts to assist those students during the course of their matriculation in high school from seventh through the twelfth grade. They are provided with summer academic experiences. They are given after-school support during the academic year. Upon completion of their high school programs, if they maintained a "C" or better, they are encouraged to apply to Rutgers and to any other college that might be of interest to them, and if Rutgers elects to admit them, they are provided with free tuition. Many of those kids who have come through the program over the course of the last five or six years, if I'm not mistaken, maybe a little longer than that--because this program was established when Bill Howard was chair of the Board of Governors and it was his idea to do something like this because he made a statement to the effect that based on his observation within the not-too-distant future, Rutgers would have among its matriculating students none who were residents of the communities in which the university had campuses. As a result of that, McCormick encouraged the University to create a program that would make that an impossibility, which resulted in this program called Rutgers Future Scholars. I think it's been very successful, quite frankly. Students have come through that, some of whom have--I don't know if there have been any summa cum laudes out of that pool. I could check. I wouldn't be surprised, but there have been all kinds of scholarship awards, fellowships awarded to the students. I think there may have even been a Truman Scholar selected from among the Rutgers Future Scholars population. So, anyhow, it's been successful, and I hope it continues.

It would be great if New Brunswick had a larger share of African American matriculating students than it currently has, and it's an issue that was a particular concern to me when I chaired the board's Academic and Student Affairs Committee. I think I did that for three or four years. I know I did it for at least three years; it may have been four years. It is now an issue that has surfaced as a critical issue for the Black alumni of Rutgers University, focused particularly on matriculation at the New Brunswick campus.

SI: The advisory board for Rutgers-Newark, that was different than the provost's advisory?

RR: Yes, the Rutgers-Newark Advisory Board, on which I now serve, was established based on legislative direction associated with the merger of UMDNJ and Rutgers University. The legislation mandates that there be a Rutgers-Newark advisory board, a Camden advisory board. In fact, they have a Camden Board of Directors that has a relationship with both the Rutgers-

Camden campus and ... [Editor's Note: In 2013, in addition to the merger of Rutgers and UMDNJ, the Newark and Camden campuses of Rutgers both were given advisory boards and chancellor positions to oversee the campuses.]

SI: Rowan?

RR: Rowan University. I think there's a New Brunswick Advisory Board as well. I'm pretty sure there's an advisory board for each. I was invited to join it as soon as it was established. Nancy Cantor extended the invitation to me, and I have been on it for three years, three or four years. [Editor's Note: Dr. Nancy Cantor has served as the chancellor of Rutgers Newark since 2014.]

SI: Yes.

RR: It's advisory in the sense that we are briefed on a quarterly basis by members of the faculty and the administration regarding initiatives underway at the Newark campus focused on the academic program offered to students, on the research agenda of faculty that is relevant both to the student population and to the region in which the school is located, and issues of administration that have to do with the Newark campus' relationship to the central campus. We are active discussants regarding those three aspects of the University's operations. It's been very successful from my perspective. The board is composed of both administrators at the University, administrators and faculty, and the staff of the University and external actors like myself. The current chairman of the advisory board, I think he's been chairman for three or four years, Oliver Quinn, is a graduate of Rutgers Law School but an undergraduate alum of Syracuse, where Nancy Cantor was president before she came to Newark. Michellene Davis, another external member of the advisory board, is a senior executive at RWJBarnabas Health. There is a retired superior court judge on the advisory board. The superintendent of the Newark Public Schools is on the advisory board. The president of NJPAC is a member of the advisory board. Who else external? The founder of Audible ...

SI: Okay, yes.

RR: ... Don Katz is on the advisory board. Marge Derrick, who is a member of the Rutgers Board of Governors and a former member of the Rutgers Board of Trustees, is also an external member of the advisory board. She is the official representative of the Board of Governors. I am an official community representative on the advisory board.

SI: Yes, I wanted to ask about stuff like that, because all of this came out of the legislation surrounding the mergers, you noted.

RR: Correct.

SI: That included the expansion of the Board of Governors to include members appointed by the governor, including yourself.

RR: Correct.

SI: First, can you tell me how that came about? How did you hear that you were going to be asked to do this? How did that come about?

RR: When the legislation was enacted and signed into law, I was contacted by the then Speaker of the Assembly, Sheila Oliver, and asked if I would consider being appointed to the Rutgers Board of Governors as a representative from Essex County, consistent with the stipulations in the legislation. I think there has to be an Essex County representative and there must be a Middlesex County representative on the Board of Governors, both, if I'm not mistaken, nominated by the Speaker of the Assembly and then appointed without appearance before the Senate by the governor. All of the other governor's appointees have to appear and be approved by the Senate. I was not approved by the Senate. I did not have to go through that process. My successor, however, will be required to go before the Senate because the legislation stipulates that the subsequent appointees by the governor from those two counties will, like all other appointees by the governor, appear before the Senate. So, it worked out fine for me because I like Sheila Oliver. Sheila Oliver likes me. I respect Sheila Oliver. Obviously, she respects me. I have worked with Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, she's now the lieutenant governor, she wasn't then. She has a contribution, a reflection, in the book that I mentioned the last time we spoke, that I now have a copy of, by the way. [Editor's Note: Sheila Oliver has served as the lieutenant governor of New Jersey since 2018. Oliver served in the New Jersey General Assembly from 2004 to 2018, during which time she was Speaker of the Assembly from 2014 to 2018. Robert C. Holmes and Richard W. Roper are the editors of *A Mayor for All the People: Kenneth Gibson's Newark* (Rutgers University Press, 2020).]

That's the basis upon which I was appointed to the Board of Governors. My term ended in July of 2019. It's a six-year term. I am now a holdover on the Board of Governors because the governor has not nominated my successor, nor has he nominated anyone for appointment to any board or commission, to my knowledge, since he and the President of the Senate have not been working cooperatively. I'm a holdover until something is done in Trenton by the governor and approved by the Senate. I hope that it's done sooner rather than later, but we shall see. [Editor's Note: Stephen M. Sweeney served in the New Jersey Senate from the 3rd District from 2002 until he lost reelection in a surprise upset in 2021. Sweeney held the post of President of the Senate from 2010 to 2022.]

SI: There were some fears expressed when the legislation took place that this would give Trenton in general, the governor in particular, more influence over Rutgers. How do you think that was dealt with, and was it difficult for you in your position coming on to the Board?

RR: Fear, concern, yes.

SI: Fear, concern, or blowback on you or anything?

RR: I suspect there was concern, but when I was welcomed to the Board of Governors, unlike other new appointees to the board, I spoke for a few minutes, addressed the full board and told them I wanted to thank the Speaker of the Assembly who nominated me and the governor who appointed me. The reason I said that was because Speaker Oliver had been insistent that the

relationship between the governor's office and the University would not be altered appreciably as a result of the addition of the four new members to the Board of Governors. I think before it was eleven members, now it's fifteen, if I'm not mistaken. She had been very protective of the University with regard to attempts that were then underway to peel off Rutgers Law School and give that entity to Rowan University. The members of the Board of Governors were aware of her position and I wanted them to be aware of my inclination to support her position relative to that.

I think there were concerns, but subsequent to my appointment and the appointment of the other three members to the board by the governor, it became clear that although we were gubernatorial appointees, we were very much committed to the independence of the University, that the governor should be respected, his opinion be respected, but that his control of the decision-making process of the University simply was not appropriate. It has been said by current members of the Board of Governors that they have a deep appreciation for the fact that the governor's appointees to the Board of Governors have been very responsive to the interests of the University and particularly its autonomy. That is not an issue any longer. It really isn't.

SI: Okay. When you first came on to the Board of Governors, I know you get committee assignments, were you immediately on the Academic and Student Affairs Committee?

RR: I was not. I think my first year I was on the Finance Committee. The second year, I was appointed to the Academic and Student Affairs Committee and to the Joint Committee on Investment. The third year, I think near the end of my third year, I was appointed the chair of the Academic and Student Affairs Committee. I'm pretty sure it was in the third year, because Gordon McGuinness had preceded me as chair. I succeeded Gordon McGuinness as the chair of the committee, so whenever he stepped away is when I became the chair. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I really found it both empowering and it allowed me to learn much more about how the University reaches out to its sixty-some thousand students in a very responsible way to address not only their academic and educational needs but their financial, their recreational, their community service, how comprehensive the University's administration has been and is in addressing the whole needs of its students. It's an impressive enterprise with a very committed group of staff people involved in trying to address the range of needs and concerns that our students have with respect to issues of student safety, student inclusion in the decision-making process, concern about student sensitivity to social and environmental issues, up to and including considering student activism in the area of the environment, for example, that impacts how the University thinks about the quality of its investments. So, it's a very, I think, responsive posture on the part of the University in terms of recognizing that the students have some legitimate issues that the leadership must take into consideration as it makes policy and implements administrative policy and procedures.

The one area, I'm consistent on this, that I find the University has been less than adequate in addressing has to do with the enrollment of minority students, underrepresented groups, in New Brunswick. It's particularly troubling to me that New Brunswick has not done as much as it might, as has been the case in Newark and Camden in addressing the admission and the education of African American students in particular. I think the University's done a better job with Latinos and it has done a terrific job with respect to Asians, but African Americans in New

Brunswick are the underserved individuals. It's particularly troubling for me because Princeton has a greater percentage of African American matriculants than does Rutgers-New Brunswick, and that should not be. Princeton isn't at ten percent yet, but Rutgers is at seven percent. The other dimension to that problem is the University's inability, like other national universities, to retain and graduate African American males. It's a tragic reality, but there are things that can be done, things that are being done, at the University of Maryland, for example, College Park, that have resulted in the percentage of African American males completing their undergraduate program. In fact, Rutgers-Newark is doing a better job than the other two campuses in that respect.

SI: Do you think that is the fault of the inertia or structural racism in general at the University and in society, or are there other reasons that kind of compound that?

RR: I can't explain it. I can only say that it's something that suggests structural racial discrimination, but the Executive Vice President for Academic Operations is an African American woman. The Vice [Chancellor] for Academic Enrollment is an African American male. The two leaders in that area are Black, but the tone is set at the top and I just don't think that President Barchi is as concerned about that as he should be. I think, in part, there's a desire to keep Rutgers' admission, the Rutgers-New Brunswick admission of African Americans, because it's the flagship campus, in the range of other top ten and Ivy League schools, to be consistent with where they are. It's unfortunate, but we're not doing as well. [Editor's Note: Dr. Robert Barchi served as the president of Rutgers University from 2012 to 2020.]

SI: You alluded to earlier integrating student views into policy areas and divestment from coal and other environmentally-problematic areas of investment. Would you say that the University has moved towards that or at least has shifted policy to make it seem that they're addressing these issues?

RR: What the University has done through the Joint Committee on Investment includes having met with the students who are particularly concerned about this, listen to their views and, over the course of the last year and a half, began to form a set of policies that will govern the process by which decisions are made about investments in areas that have environmental impacts. So, that is the most important step that the University has made, and those policies and procedures have been shared with the students. They have welcomed those procedures. They are now in place and govern how the University addresses those issues, and I think the students seem satisfied.

SI: A perennial issue for the Board of Governors is tuition increases, that sort of thing, which your committee assignments would seem to put you right in the middle of that.

RR: Right.

SI: Do you have any memories or thoughts regarding those debates and the role of students in shifting policy?

RR: Yes. This is an area that I care a lot about, keeping tuition as low as possible so that attending Rutgers, all three campuses of Rutgers, is within the reach of students who happen to live in New Jersey. Tuition increases are going to be debated every year, because there are three principal sources of income to the University that allow the University to operate, the first of which is what the legislature budgets for the University. That's only twenty percent of the University's total budget. A share comes from the endowment, and then the remainder comes from tuition and federal government sources in the form of grants. When the tuition issue is being examined each year by the administration, there is a serious attempt to recognize that any increase is going to be a burden on our students, but increases are almost mandated by the level of support that the University receives from the state. That support has gone down over the years and has not increased, and New Jersey really needs to do a better job of providing state-level support for higher education, especially for the University that's called the State University of New Jersey. It simply is unconscionable, in my view, for there to be a level of support that's in the twenty-percent range, when failure to provide more impacts students in a negative way because of tuition increases. But we've managed to keep tuition [increases] at under three percent. Over my tenure on the Board of Governors, it's been in the area of 2.3, and I don't think it's been over 2.5 percent in the past six years.

SI: Going back to when you joined the Board in 2013 and looking at the history of it, it seems like the integration of the medical school into Rutgers was a major issue. Do you remember that taking up a great deal of the board's time?

RP: Well, there is a committee responsible for health-related issues, and that's the committee that provides supervisory advice about the medical school or Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences complex. It was a big issue, but because the integration has been really successful without any major hitches in the process, the committee's work has not been overwhelming. The committee was chaired by a psychologist, I think; Dorothy Cantor is her name. Dorothy is very good, and she works well with the president and she works well with the chancellor who was chosen to provide leadership for Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences. Dr. [Brian] Strom, the chancellor, is an amazing guy, very capable. He has been responsible for the integration in a hands-on way of working with the president of the University and has attracted some of the top academic administrators and academic faculty in the country from the University of Pennsylvania, from Harvard, from Yale, from Michigan. He's really been able to bring to Rutgers an outstanding cast of health care professionals, healthcare academics, healthcare providers, healthcare administrators. [Editor's Note: Dr. Brian Strom is the Chancellor of Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (RBHS) and the Executive Vice President for Health Affairs at Rutgers University. He began serving in the position in 2013.]

SI: I know the role of athletics at the University is always an issue that goes on. Are there any thoughts that come to mind or any issues that would come to the board's attention?

RP: Well, I've never been all that crazy about Rutgers being in the Big Ten. I don't consider that to be a big deal, quite frankly. If that's what the University wanted to do prior to my getting on the board, all well and good, but I don't spend very much time thinking about the athletics program. What I have been concerned about, and I have raised this with the leadership of the University, is the recruitment of football players in particular who seem to have social

challenges, who have brought to the campus behavioral problems that I think are avoidable, that young men can be identified who can matriculate at Rutgers-New Brunswick and play football for Rutgers-New Brunswick who are socially well adjusted and are not going to be behavior problems or bring problems to the campus. I've made clear that the University can do a better job of recruiting football players, be they majority or minority students. That issue, I think, is going to be a part of the conversation going forward. The University has been embarrassed by some of the behavior of its football players and rightly so. [Editor's Note: Rutgers joined the Big Ten Conference in 2014.]

SI: Now, I have seen more programs being instituted, going back to the issue of supporting students in general towards graduation, particularly members of minority groups and others who have been previously underrepresented.

RR: Underrepresented.

SI: Yes. I would imagine that would come up in your work on the Academic and Student Affairs Committee. Are there any memories of the initiatives that have been instituted in that regard?

RR: I can't give you the names of the initiatives, but I know that they've been substantial. The challenge that the University confronts in recognizing and then responding to academic-support needs of students, be they majority or minority, quite frankly, is that oftentimes students are reluctant to acknowledge that they need help and then seek out the help that's available to them. The University provides a range of support services, both with respect to academic issues, social issues, healthcare issues, financial issues. All of those things are addressed, I think, in a concerted and responsible way. Students have to be willing to take advantage of those services to avoid finding themselves in situations that call into question their ability to get through the academic program. I don't think I've been disappointed in that regard by the University's offering of services to support students, and I think it's done a pretty good job in that regard.

SI: Okay. If we have not talked about it already, are there things that you recall as being particularly your pet projects or things that maybe were born out of ideas you had or were really influenced by ideas you had?

RR: Primarily the issues that I've already discussed, those things having to do with diversity, inclusion and providing support to students who are facing financial challenges, social challenges, health challenges. I think the University has done a good job, and I think our committee has been responsible by making sure that those issues get the attention they deserve. I've also tried to make sure that New Brunswick acknowledges the academic successes being achieved at the Newark and the Camden campuses. For example, the Newark campus is very proud of its debate team, and the Board of Governors has acknowledged their success over the past couple of years. I think we've done similar things in Camden. We have an Honors College in New Brunswick, that is, I think, very strong but different than the Honors College at Newark and Camden, both of which are also strong. But they are different and they attempt to recognize excellence in a broader context. SATs matter, but SATs are not the be-all to end-all.

SI: Well, we talked about how the University-wide view of all three campuses changed from Lawrence to the McCormick administration, and a lot of these changes that were worked into the legislation in 2012 were supposed to address some of these issues as well, like creating chancellors on each campus and the advisory boards, things like that. Looking back over the last few years since these things have taken hold, do you think it has improved the parity between the campuses?

RR: I think it's made an important contribution in that regard. I think President Barchi's recruitment of Nancy Cantor as the chancellor of the Newark campus was a huge boon to Newark. She has done a phenomenal job in addressing the campus's academic reputation, its research of relevance to the community in which it's located, and her recruitment and promotion of locally-identified students for the campus. Rutgers-Newark is the most diverse component of the Rutgers University community, followed by Camden, followed by New Brunswick. The share of minority students, I would imagine is close to thirty-five to forty percent if not more. Asians, like all three campuses, are the largest minority group, followed by Latinx, and followed by African Americans. But the work that Nancy has done to make Rutgers-Newark both academically respectable and relevant to the community in which it's located is just phenomenal. She's gotten national recognition for herself and for the campus, as a result of her work there. She's in her second five-year term of office as chancellor. She was just renewed last year.

SI: Going back to your time on the advisory board there, I think one fear that was expressed at the beginning, in 2012 or so, was that it just might be window dressing to address the concerns of the constituents, but it sounds like from what you have described, it is a bit more than that.

RR: Oh, no question about it. Absolutely.

SI: There is real input on part of the board members.

RR: Oh, yes. The advisory board is a contributor to the conversations and the work that takes place at Rutgers-Newark, and I think our role will expand as the external members of the advisory board are convened for the purpose of determining how we might deepen our contribution to the University campus going forward.

SI: Looking at the history of the University over the last fifty years or so, I have interviewed a lot of alumni or faculty who talk about trying to make end-runs around the University by trying to go to the Board of Governors. I would imagine that is something that always might come up, but is that something that you recall, people trying to reach out to you or other members of the board to talk about their pet projects or whatever?

RR: With the exception of the leadership of the faculty unions, that has not been an issue. I have not experienced any pressure from alumni constituents or components of the University attempting to circumvent the University structure, the academic and the administrative structure of the University. Now, the unions will try to pressure us on an ongoing basis, and I'm not surprised by that, quite frankly. That's what unions do, if they don't get what they want or they don't get enough of what they want. But the board has been pretty consistent in following the procedures in place to address situations of that type. When and if we are contacted by email or

text, because folk don't have our phone numbers, we refer those inquiries to the Secretary to the Board, and she, because it's been a woman during my tenure, will assume responsibility for following through either in a proactive or another way.

SI: One of the big issues in the last year or so was the potential faculty strike. Any memories of that?

RR: Like I said, the union attempted to reach out to me and to other members of the Board of Governors, and we referred them to the secretary's office. We don't engage in conversations outside of our committee meetings or our Board of Governors meetings with individuals who are not a part of those two arenas, if you will, unless we are asked to do so. If we are asked to communicate with someone, then we'll do that, but that's highly unlikely. In most instances, we are asked to refer all requests for information, requests for assistance, et cetera, to the secretary's office, and we do.

SI: Okay. Are there any other memories from your time on the board that stand out that you want to talk about? I would imagine it takes up a great deal of your time.

RR: The one thing that I remember and it wasn't very positive, in my view--and everything else, I've been very pleased with the way that my term as chair of the Academic and Students Affairs committee transpired--but when President Obama accepted the invitation to come and speak at the University's commencement that celebrated the 250th anniversary, I recommended, as a member of the Board of Governors, that students graduating at Rutgers-Newark and at Rutgers-Camden be invited as guests to attend the commencement ceremony when President Obama was to speak. While that was eventually accomplished, there was pushback from President Barchi because he felt that space given to the Newark and Camden graduating seniors would deny space for the grandparents of graduating New Brunswick students, and I thought that was an offensive comment. We had a few words about that, but eventually it was decided that that was a good idea. So, we did have smaller than expected representation from Newark and a larger representation from Camden students who came as guests. They didn't participate in commencement. They just came as guests.

SI: You are coming to the end of your term. Do you think you will continue your work with the University?

RR: Oh, no question about it. I'm an alum. I will probably continue to be on the advisory board in Newark. There will be offers made to do things University wide. Last year, I was inducted into the Rutgers African-American Alumni Alliance Hall of Fame. I don't know why it took them so long to do that since I was recognized in 1993 as a Distinguished Alum of the Rutgers-Newark campus. I was recognized in nineteen--I can't remember, but it was after '93 I believe, as a distinguished African American alum at Princeton and some other award. Yes, I'll continue to be active with the University in some form or fashion going forward.

SI: You have also continued, as we have talked about before we started recording, in other educational organizations, like Essex County Community College and its foundation.

RR: I am on the Essex County College Foundation Leadership Council, and that's a small group of five people whose principal role is to help in identifying individuals, organizations and institutions that will support the college financially. I've been on it for less than a year. I'm happy to be of service to Essex County College. I think it does a terrific job of identifying, supporting, educating and then pushing students onto four-year colleges. Rutgers-Newark, Rutgers-New Brunswick take transfer students from that institution. So, to the extent that I can be helpful to it, I want to be. I'll continue to do that. But my wife tells me I'm not going to join any more boards, although I've just been asked to join the board of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, NJPAC. I'll probably do that, but that's likely to be the last board I join. I'm too old.

SI: You have also been involved with the New Jersey Coalition for Diverse and Inclusive Schools.

RR: That's correct. I'm on its board. That's a large board. There must be at least fifteen or twenty individuals drawn from across the state who are involved in either education, social justice, the academy--I guess those are the three areas. The social justice would include people like myself, prominent clergy from across the state, a couple of them, leaders of non-profit organizations, like the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, the Latino Alliance, there's an immigration group represented on the board, there are several members of the Rutgers Law School faculty, retired members of the New Jersey Supreme Court. The chair of the coalition is Justice [Gary] Stein. His son, who is a partner in the law firm that they operate in Hackensack, is also on the coalition's board. It is focused on attempting to get New Jersey to recognize that it has a responsibility as a state to confront the extreme school segregation that exists in New Jersey. We're one of the most racially segregated states in the nation, and that's reflected in our secondary school population. There is a legal brief that has been drafted and introduced by the coalition and is now being negotiated with the Murphy administration, led by the Attorney General's office, to frame and advance a set of policies that might mitigate the extent of racial segregation in public schools throughout the state. It's a tough, tough topic, and it's not going to be easily fixed, quite frankly. It's going to take years, even if the recommendations begin to move forward. Nothing has happened as yet. There is an education process being sponsored by the coalition to ensure that the people who the effort is intended to assist welcome the initiative and don't consider it ... [Editor's Note: Gary S. Stein served as an Associate Justice on the New Jersey Supreme Court from 1985 to 2002. He teaches at Rutgers Law School and is Special Counsel for Pashman Stein Walder Hayden.]

SI: An attack?

RR: ... Not an attack, but don't see it as an unwelcomed posture of noblesse oblige, where they have not been involved in the conversation about the why, the how, the when recommendations should be framed in advance. That is, unlike Abbott, the Abbott decision, which was defined, framed and advanced by an elite group of individuals who felt they knew what needed to be done with respect to school finance reform in New Jersey without the engagement of the people who were going to be affected by the changes they were proposing. This is an attempt, and the coalition is the means by which that attempt is being addressed, to include those people, be they rural residents, urban residents, or suburban residents, to include the people who are going to be

impacted by whatever comes out of this effort to ensure that they understand the why, the what, and the when--understand and appreciate. It's a long effort though. It's going to take years.
[Editor's Note: In *Abbott v. Burke* and subsequent decisions, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the state must ensure parity in educational funding between poor urban school districts and affluent suburban districts.]

SI: Sure. Is there anything else you would like to add to the record for today?

RR: I can't think of anything.

SI: When you get the transcripts for this, as you look over it, there might be things that come up. I encourage you to make notes. We can always come back again.

RR: Sounds good.

SI: Thank you so much. I really appreciate all your time.

RR: My pleasure.

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