

Interview with Robert Pecotte

Marquette, Michigan

March 29, 1995

Mark Trist (MT): I'm here with Mr. Robert, Pecotte. Marquette, Michigan March 29th, 1995 by Robert Trist.

Robert Pecotte (RP): My name is Robert L. Pecotte. The last name is spelled P E C O T T E. I been on, I was born in 4242 and I've been the financial aid director here at Northern Michigan University since 1965.

MT: Can you describe the program from when you started and how it's changed?

RP: Well the programs have changed a lot, back in 1958 when the Russians shot up their first Sputnik, the federal government in the United States decided that they should educate more young people and it was really, the first program was the nation defense student loan program and it was set up for science majors and nobody else. So prior to 1965 when most of the financial aid programs were started and when I started on my job the only people who were going to college were those who were living in a college town, those who knew science and math and had a good background there and were lucky enough to get the loan program, or had some kind of talent. If you're an athlete or somebody really wanted you because of talent, you were the only person who was going to school. Then in 1965 the federal government changed their philosophy, and they really decided that everyone in this country should be allowed to go to college, and that was probably the major breakthrough in higher education. As they started loan programs, grant programs, and work programs which we still have today.

MT: Can you describe some of the strengths and weaknesses of this department?

RP: Well I think the strength of the department, obviously I'd like to think that I am a strength to the department but I have a staff that has stayed with this, these programs for many years and I think in a business way there's an awful lot of detail, keeping people on the job who are eventually trained so that you don't have to supervise them every minute and you know what they're doing, I think that's a real strength in a program. If I had to say a weakness I would say, we could use more people, and we could always use more money. The concern I have right now as a weakness is that everyone in this country is

borrowing money far more than they should be borrowing. When they leave here they owe us an awful lot of money here at this school and we are one of the cheapest in the country so you can imagine what they are borrowing at large private schools.

MT: Do you have any problems with people not paying back?

RP: Well surprisingly not in the Upper Peninsula, believe it or not the people here know they take out a loan, they have a commitment to repay it and our default rate here at Northern right now is less than 7 percent on the loans that go through the banks and its less than 4 percent for the loans that the university gives out themselves. So it's a very good low interest, uh default rate. Now in the last few years people have been borrowing more so I'm a little nervous that that default rate will go up and could go as high as double digits with the amount that people are borrowing.

MT: What moral programs have had the biggest impact on this department?

RP: Well I think of the student body I think the Pell grant is the biggest grant program available to students and,

MT: Do you know when that came?

RP: That started in 1972 and we started our first year we had 30,000 dollars that was it. Two years ago we had 5.2 million in Pell grants. That's dropped off a little bit because the government has tightened up the requirements, but we had 3200 students on Pell grants two years ago, and we have about 2500 on it right now. So without that program there would be a lot of people who wouldn't be going to school right now. The other program is the loan program, anybody can borrow, so that's certainly an opportunity it's not a strength in my mind, but it is an option for people who don't have the money at home.

MT: Is that a lot like the Stafford loan?

RP: That is the Stafford loan, going through the banks, we are going to change that coming starting this coming fall, a major change the Stafford loan has been with us since 1965, we are now going to lend the money directly from Northern to the students, and we will ask the federal government for the money and they'll send it to us overnight and we should be able to get it to the student in the next 48 hours. So students will no longer have to go to a bank to get an application, big change. It better work [Laughter].

MT: Can you remember, has the financial aid system changed at all?

RP: Yeah it has changed, it's gotten a lot more difficult for families to prove their eligibility. Back when I started I had probably three or four questions that I had to ask people to evaluate whether they were edible or not, eligible in their finances, now it's a three or four pages, or three or four page document that they have to complete and it goes through a national clearing house and they determine a student's eligibility for us, we don't do it locally. So that's a major change. And they don't take into account local differences in the costs of living in Marquette county verses the costs of living in Detroit. They treat everybody in their present financial situation and they don't worry about some of the costs associated with living in certain areas.

MT: For student employment and all that department is breaking up at this point?

RP: We are spreading out the placement, we will continue to monitor work study which is a federal program and say who is eligible and we will keep track of the spending so that we don't run over the amount that the government gives us. But in between, the placement office, I think they are calling it the job search office now they are going to change their name. Will actually do the assigning of jobs or help students find jobs on their own, I'm not sure how they are going to do that yet, but we will be out of the placement part of finding you a job in the cafeteria or in the math department or whatever. Major change, we'll see how that goes. [Laughter]

MT: What jobs, do you remember any different jobs in the past student employment?

RP: Well when I first started, at one time I ran an off campus program in the summer time where students who were eligible for work study, I ran as high as 500 jobs in the Upper Peninsula, where students are working Gwinn High School or K. I. Sawyer School, or they'd work in the library in Marquette or in Houghton or Iron Mountain, and I'd spend half my summer going out and checking to make sure they were working and I wasn't getting any false time sheets and things like that. It was a good part of my job because I got out of the office, but the funding has dried up on the work study program right now to the point where we really can't go off campus, but it was nice for students to be able to work in their hometown in the summer and have a little bit of extra money to come to school. So that has changed, other than that the students who work here now, I mean there's some awfully good jobs, some are even in the financial aid office there are some here that are really helping decided how much aid eligibility some students have. Then there are the other jobs over in the cafeteria that aren't so exciting.

MT: Do you remember any interesting situations in the past?

RP: Well, I guess there are always interesting situations, I think some of the campus, I've been here so long that I started here as a student in 1960 and stayed right on in the financial aid business except for a short period of time when I lived in Detroit. So I've seen the campus grow but I think the most exciting times that I ever saw, and they weren't financial aid times was the 1967-1968 where the minority students, the Afro-American students were rioting on the campus to the point where they actually stopped a basketball game over in the field house where they just got out on the floor and said there won't be a ball game. They were demanding more scholarships in my area, but they were all over this campus demanding something, I don't think they really knew, it was a thing to do nationwide and I think they got caught up in that and I'm not sure they really knew why they were out there but they felt they had a cause, and maybe they did, it seems like things got better for them and some of their demands were met and they worked out alright. But that I think was the most exciting time, this campus did not know what was going to happen next, I can remember if there were 30 students sitting in one person's office, everybody else felt happy that they were in that person's office and not in theirs, it was difficult. We didn't know if some people were going to get hurt, actual vice presidents were kidnapped and held in their offices for three or four days at a time, it was not a fun time in a lot of ways. After that I think the most exciting time or difficult times were seeing the Vietnam War veterans come home and we had an awful lot of them going to school here, probably 1,200 I think at one time I ran through here. They were really a very bitter group as well, they had fought a war and nobody really appreciated, many of them were shot up, I mean they came in here on crutches and had an awful lot of disabilities, you don't see that around the campus now, you see vets but you don't even know they are vets today. We knew who the Vietnam vets were, they were just, it was not fun. Those two things stuck in my mind in thirty years.

MT: Where do you think this program is headed in the future?

RP: Well it would be nice if you didn't have to have financial aid and that education was free to everybody but in reality that's not going to happen, costs are getting higher and they are going to continue to escalate as the demand for higher wages and things like that happen on a college campus, the costs go up and financial aid is not going to keep up with the costs as they are so, I would think, there have been a lot of ideas out there that parents would get a tax break and they'd have enough money right at home to allow the student to come to school but my background in this business has shown me that parents really don't have a savings account, at least not enough to send their sons or daughters to school. So financial aid is going to be here, I'm afraid loans are going to be here probably

longer than anything else because right now it seems like republicans are in control in Washington, and when republicans are in control they really push loan programs and work programs, and the democrats push the grant programs so right now it looks like the loan programs are going to get bigger, and we're already seeing that.

MT: So, at first were the loans bigger or just the financial aid?

RP: Well the loans started out as the biggest way back, and then in '65 the grants started to come in, there was a program called supplemental grants, we still have it, it's not a lot of money but the program is still here but that was the grant program, but you know the state has a scholarship program in Lansing, they have some grant programs for private colleges, and there are some other grant programs out there, but the grants are dropping and the loan programs are taking over. We spent about 25 million dollars here, and the grants are run somewhere between 10 and 12 million, the loans are run between 10 and 12 million, and the work will probably run around 3 million for this coming year, probably the year we just finished.

MT: Just a little background on the financial aid, how does it work, let's say I wanted to, what would I do?

RP: You fill out a financial statement that again, is the basis of 90 percent of the financial aid programs. The government will give you a number which basically tells us your family's contribution and we fit that to the charts for all of the programs that we have available. We set up parameters for everything that is available through the office and where you would fit in those parameters would be based on that number that you get from the federal government. Now we have probably another 5 to 10 percent of the dollars that are based on talent, like in music and drama and visual arts, we set aside scholarships there. Athletics have a sizable scholarship program for athletes, we have some scholarships, and quite a sizable amount of scholarship money based on academics, and then all of the departments here on our campus have money where private people have started a scholarship and they have earmarked it for the school of business or the school of nursing or school of education, and as a student you can compete for those scholarships away from our office over in those departments, and they actually tell us who those recipients are. There are several different things going on.

MT: Do you think of anybody, an individual that's left, like in the last 20 years, that's left a considerable amount for scholarships?

RP: Yeah, I've had, over the years I've had a lot of people who have started scholarship programs, the biggest one was the Sam Cohodas scholarship program and basically what it was if it was his 75th birthday or is 85th birthday, he lived a long time, where we actually raised close to 100,000 dollars at a function here in the Hedgecock fieldhouse just a birthday party for him and that money is being spent for scholarships in the school of business. So there are ten, 1000 dollar scholarships that we award a year in his memory. I've had another one, a faculty member's mom came in, he had since died and she started a 25,000 dollar scholarship last year. So those are all kinds of, we've had doctors and lawyers and a lot of people who have started programs and its getting bigger all the time. Never have enough, I mean we could use more everyday but there are people out there who are donating and not many people know about it. And they usually do it that way, they don't want to be known. They just want to give the money. I've had some people that I've given scholarships to and they've gone out and been successful and they've given the money back to us. I have even had a young man who went here for his first two years, never graduated, but because I gave him a scholarship in his freshman and sophomore year and he wanted to go someplace else to finish up, he has never forgotten us. He gives us 1000 dollars a year, no questions asked and he'll deal with me every time, he'll write me the check and so those are the nice things that go on, behind the scenes.

MT: Okay I think...

RP: You did pretty good, that wasn't so bad see [Laughter].

MT: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]