

Interview with Matt Surrell

April 7, 1995

Interviewer (I): This is, I'll ask a little about you, about your background. Like you know, how did you get to NMU and how many years you've been here?

Matt Surrell (MS): I've been here about 20 years, I have been secretary of the board since 1978 I believe. And I was here originally in 1972 and I left in '76 and came back at the end of 1977 as vice president of university affairs and then the year after that became secretary of the board.

I: Okay, what are your duties as secretary?

MS: Well we work with each and every board member of the board to make sure that the information flow goes to them in terms of the affairs of the university. And we orient all new board members as to their responsibilities under the constitution and we work with the president and the board chairman in developing agendas for the board of control needs. The board of control is responsible for all of the financial fiduciary that occurs in the university, everybody that is hired at the university is approved by the board of control.

I: I was listening to some information too about the selection of the members of the board?

MS: These men and women are appointed by the governor unlike the University of Michigan and Michigan State and Wayne State where they are elected on a ballot statewide, the trustees of all of the other universities, public universities, are appointed by the governor and then they have to be confirmed by the Michigan senate, and they are for eight year terms and so every two years, since we have an eight member board, at the end of December every two years a term of two people would expire.

I: Okay. Does it matter if it is a republican or democrat in governor or is there much difference?

MS: Well the interesting thing about this board at least is that we have had members of the democratic party, or republican party appointed by obviously different governors, governor Blanchard being a democrat, and governor Engler being a republican, but they seem to set aside any political differences to work in the best interests in the university and of course the citizens of the state. And that is their charge is to represent the best interest of the tax payers of the state and the university. So they are very good about it.

I: I have been coming across this name here Jack Rombous [SPELLED PHONETICALLY], I think?

MS: Yeah, Dr. Jack Rombous [SPELLED PHONETICALLY], was vice president for administration and secretary of the board before me, so I succeeded him as secretary of the board. And I think he retired from Northern in 1977. And then he later went on to become a member of the board of Lake Superior State University.

I: I was going to see too about some information on the relationship between the board and the rest of the administration is there like, is the board, is it very hands on or is it more or less kind of just a watch dog or?

MS: Well their policy, they see their role as exercising policy over side, their most important function is to select a president. And the president incidentally is a member of the board, but without vote. The board likes to have a good information flow to it. In particularly at board meetings there might be a focus on some issue or program or initiative that the university has underway and so they will often get into pretty good discussion and so they exhibit their strong interest but they don't attempt to micro manage the university.

I: I was going to see too, you were here, well of course in the '80s, so I was going to see about the process of selecting president Appleberry and Vandament later, what kind of person was the board looking for then?

MS: Well when Dr. Appleberry came he succeeded Dr. Jamrich, who had been here for 15 years, ending in 1983, and the board of control retained the services of a professional search, for, for a presidential search consultation service in Washington D.C. and they came in with a two member team and did a needs assessment, they interviewed members of the faculty and students, alumni, the community, and they came up with a document which described the characteristics that they believed as a result of this consensus that the next president should have. One of them being, the person should be able to tolerate cold weather. And so that was kind of a form or a blue print or a finger print or a hand print that they wanted this next president to kind of fit into. And that was a good guide to this search committee, the process took about a year from well over a hundred applicants there was a screening process that went through like a twelve or thirteen member committee which included four members of the board of control. And they went down to like seven finalists that that they interviewed and then they had, they came down to three, Dr. Appleberry being one of them. And then he was chosen from the three. And then when Dr. Appleberry left, he left on short notice because he moved to a position in Washington as the president of American Association of State Colleges and Universities AASCU. And the board had only a couple months to find a replacement so they asked Academic Search Consultation Services, slightly different name, with interestingly enough, one of the principles was also a principle in presidential search consultation services, so they went to ASCS and they came up with a list of a half a dozen or so people that might be available on an interim basis for one year to be president and the board selected from its own ranks four members of the board to interview these six or seven people. And Dr. Vandament was one of them, Dr. Vandament was very happily employed out in California he was a very high ranking official with the California State University system, and they persuaded him to come out here for one year, while the search continued. And the whole search all over again, we had two or three finalists and they interviewed them and then they decided to measure up those finalists against Dr. Vandament and then they asked Dr. Vandament if he might be willing to stay, so Dr. Vandament stayed scrupulously away from the process this whole year, he just busied himself with running the university and they went to the board satisfied with something, they didn't think anybody was better than Dr. Vandament, they asked him to stay and they said yes.

I: What is the vision that the current board has for the university? How does it see, how does it see the university working into the state higher education system?

MS: Well that is kind of broad gauged question, Dr. Vandament has wrestled with that in terms of development of a strategic plan for the university, and as a result of a process that is sort of ongoing there are like six or seven goals that the university through its own ranks has given life to. One was to sort of flatten the management and nurture the academic wings, so there was a transfer of like four of

five hundred thousand dollars from the academic administrative side to the academic side. And they have addressed other issues such as equipment replacement and so forth, but that is an ongoing process, the board is very much involved and privy to this and the board continues to ask questions, just like you did about what is our vision for the future. So it is kind of an evolving thing, there isn't necessarily, there is a mission statement, I can't recite it for you, but the board and the president are probably going to be __ continue to focus on this notion of where are we going to be x years from now. And there are some general things that I think the board has come to agreement on, and that is they are trying to keep the barrier of access as low as possible so we maintain ourselves as the, I think we are the lowest tuition, public university in the state. One of the factors driving that is that the students, about 70 percent of them come from the Upper Peninsula, and Upper Peninsula incomes are considerably lower than the state as an average, the last figures that I saw was something like 150 dollar per week per family. And so the board is sensitive to that and so the amount of money that we receive from the state appropriation, a lot of it redirected into student financial aid to help students through student employment or scholarship assistance.

I: I looked through my research, the only thing I am really having trouble with is I am trying to find stuff on like what were major board initiatives in the 1980's and kind of business really involved with...

MS: I think mainly the board saw its role as support of the administration and the president and its initiatives. You would see the board as kind of a silent partner with the president and his initiatives. For example the forging of the US Olympic committee to bring an Olympic training center to __ behind the, the university got recognized as one of the ten leading public universities on the cutting edge of the future of higher education, the board was very much behind that initiative. The accreditations and these measures and standards of excellence, the board is behind that. Whatever we are going to do we ought to do it well, or we ought to get out of the business. That is kind of the operating clause.

I: I was unsure, well let's see, I had come across this thing called long range planning commission and I don't know if that had anything directly to do with the board, it was in 1979?

MS: No.

I: Alright. Is there anything of special significance that you would see about the board, any reflections that you have about it, like the current board now or?

MS: Well I continue to be impressed with their ability to, these are people who are all very busy in their own lives and they don't get paid a dime for doing this, they maintain a pretty good learning curve as to what is going on, we keep a good information flow going through. And in their deliberations they do very very well in helping to chart the course with the president for the future of the university and sometimes these are not easy calls, particularly when you are managing in a situation where we've had to cut several million dollars out of the budget in the last four years and we are doing it again this year we are cutting another million too and we are reducing our employment by something like 60, 70, 80 jobs most of them on the administrative side. So it's sometimes not fun as they say, managing downward and shrinking something but still trying to maintain the integrity of it. So I think they take their responsibilities very seriously.

I: Who is the chair of the current board?

MS: Leo Egan is a retired executive from Ameritech Publishing, he lives in Bloomfield Hills.

I: Alright.

MS: We can give you a roster if you don't have it.

I: Well I went through the course bulletin. It probably would be some kind of a list, but no I don't have it for the current one. Well I don't know that's about all I have and I don't want to take too much of your time here,

[END OF INTERVIEW]