Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman, and I've worked for the Kansas Association of School Boards for about thirty-five years, mostly as a lobbyist, also doing research and reporting. Before that, I worked in state government as a lobbyist for university students. I'm conducting this interview with Dr. Andy Tompkins on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and other significant leaders of state government, particularly those who served from the 1960s through 2010. The interviews will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, ksoralhistory.org, and also with the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcripts are made possible by general donors. David Heinemann is our videographer today.

So, to start with, Dr. Tompkins, I've known you for a long time.

Andy Tompkins: That's right.

MT: You're now living in Topeka. You have had, suffice it to say, a broad-ranging career in public service. So I reviewed your bio. Just for our audience, really starting in the seventies, you were a classroom teacher. You were a local school superintendent in several communities. You were the commissioner of education. You've been a higher education administrator. You've been a higher education teacher. You were president and CEO of the Board of Regents. So, when I think of our Kansas Constitution and what it says, you've kind of done everything. So, we're delighted to have you for this series where the Oral History Project is wanting to focus in particular on educational issues.

So, to begin with, I think we'd just like to know a little bit about your background, where you were born and grew up, and what—we're going to be looking at both your experience as an educator, which is the beginning of your career, and then how you moved into the work of being a policy leader and advocate. So, tell us about the early days.

AT: Well, I was born in a small community east of Oklahoma City. I graduated from high school there. Then I went to a regional university in Oklahoma, East Central University. It was called East Central State then. And I taught one year in 1969-70 in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma.

I then started looking for a different job. It was really about money. I was trying to earn enough money to make a living. I got an offer to go teach in Hugoton. So from 1970 on, I've been in Kansas. What a blessing it's been for me. I was a high school English teacher.

And then I went to Emporia and got my master's and became a high school principal. Then while I was there, I had a superintendent encourage me. Since I was a principal at Pomona, he encouraged me to go and get my doctorate while I was there. So I went and got my doctorate at KU. Back then, that was an important thing, if you're wanting to try to move on. I got my doctorate and then I was superintendent of schools in three places.

Then we weren't able to have children. So I adopted a daughter while I was superintendent of El Dorado. Then when I was superintendent in Salina, we got an opportunity to adopt another child. So, we did that.

I was worried I would never see that other kid. That's when I decided, "I think maybe I might try to find something I can do to have a little more time with my newborn son"—I went to Pittsburg State at that time. Of course, I wasn't there very long, and then I became the Commissioner of Ed. I was in that role until 2005. Then, once again, my wife said I couldn't keep a job, which is probably true. Then I taught a little bit at KU. I went back as dean of Pittsburg State, and then the Board of Regents asked me to come here and help.

Then I officially retired in 2015. But then we had a president leave early right before Thanksgiving in 2016. I went out to be interim president at Fort Hays and was there just a little over a year until they found a new president.

And then in 2019, coming back from Phoenix, Arizona, if I remember right, I got a call from Blake that our president at Wichita State unfortunately had passed away in office. So I went to Wichita State as interim president until December of 2019.

So right now though, my life is mainly being retired and volunteering.

MT: We'll see if you can keep that. It sounds like if a call comes, you never know where you may go. So, I'm a little bit curious. We're certainly going to talk about your role as a leader. What got you interested in being a teacher or getting into education?

AT: My mother was a teacher. But really, after the first year of teaching and I didn't know if I was going to be able to make it, I went out and got job offers in the business world. I was getting ready to take them until I saw this ad in the Daily Oklahoman about Hugoton, and I could make about what I was going to as a starting salary in business. So, I was already trained to be a teacher. I said, "I'll go ahead and stick with that now."

And then, I don't know, it just kind of worked from there. I got a degree in School Leadership. I think I felt like I should try that. I don't know. Maybe it was in a time when you felt like there was an advancement. You need to have an advancement or something. So I thought, "Well, I'll try and see how that was."

Well, I felt good about that on most days. But I thought that being a school superintendent would be really an interesting job, and it was, and I loved being a school superintendent. So that kind of got me into that.

Then the state leadership roles, you really have to think about that because there's a lot to learn, a lot to learn. There's a difference in local—as you know, being at a state level. So that took a lot of soul searching, but it was a blessing for me to have that chance to be there during that time.

And the same with working with the Regents. I think one of the things I found in the superintendency is—there's going to be some who think this is a little weird, but I love working with boards. And the reason I love boards is I know you have one-offs and things that happen. But seeing them coalesce around things, the disagreements they have and how they kind of come together eventually and learn to respect each other. I don't know. There's something about that that I thought was good.

 

MT: It's interesting because a lot of the people who have been interviewed in this project have been legislators, elective roles.

AT: Right.

MT: So you've had a career in service that hasn't really involved being elected yourself for the most part, but you've worked for elected officials, elected board members.

AT: That's correct.

MT: And that's a little different animal than like a legislator or something like that. It's smaller, but I assume you have some of those same tensions. I think what I'd like to explore with you a little bit based on that is, I certainly want to talk about some of those issues. As you think about that, you've already mentioned that kind of tension between locals, I mean, we're a very local-controlled state, but on the other hand, there's very clearly a state role and responsibility for quality and those sorts of things. We have a lot of those kind of tensions that you've had to kind of bridge.

I think one consistent through all of this is education has always been a very important—it's probably the biggest thing the state does, one of its biggest responsibilities. It's one of the biggest functions of local government. So maybe starting—you talked about liking being a superintendent. You worked several places throughout the state. We could kind of go back in time a little bit to that period. Maybe talk a little bit about what were some of the issues you faced there. What I want to be thinking about is, over this time, over these many decades, how has our expectations of what we want from our school system or our college—what do we think an educated person should be, and how should that look like?

So, let's go back to the eighties, I guess, and think a little bit about what were the issues there ? What was driving change at that time that you were having to deal with as a superintendent?

AT: So, in the first superintendency I had, which was in the mid-seventies, we were still in an era in that rural community where they would spend two hours talking about the bid on the buses, and I could bring a whole K-8 curriculum to them, and it would be a 7-0 vote, and we probably wouldn't be there ten minutes for that. I mean, those things just weren't an issue for most of them at that time.

But, you know, all of those things have started happening with the integration of schools, special ed, and all that, and those became greater and greater issues. So, then you saw what was happening on a larger scale started affecting that local board more and more. By the time I moved from that small school district in Satanta to El Dorado, we had run all the special ed for nine school districts, I think, all the Butler County schools. All of a sudden, that was a much bigger issue, and we were the one running it, and I had to work with all of the superintendents and sometimes their boards.

 

So, that was a big issue, and, of course, the economy always affects schools. So, we had periods of times, like, for example, the bust in the oil fields in the early eighties and especially in Butler County, that was a big issue. You had to be sensitive to the fact that what's happening to the people there and our board members representing those people, but the one thing that's so great about this state is that people always want to do better.

That sounds so simplistic, but I don't care who the most feisty board member you've got. Ultimately, they want it to be better. So you could capitalize on that. There, we'd have issues on special ed. We were having issues on finance, of course, at that time, big time, and so forth.

Then, as you know, this morphed ultimately into the '92 [school] finance act and ultimately to the 2005 finance [act], but the finances were always an issue, and you had some boards that were willing to be involved statewide and some who had no interest in that.

MT: Again, as I think back on those times, some of the big issues that you would have faced, certainly special education. That law was only passed in '75. So, moving into the eighties, that was still being implemented. Teacher rights, negotiations, due process, those were still relatively new at that time. So, some of those changes were taking place, but another big thing I guess that strikes me that happened in the eighties that really had reverberations into the nineties and probably part of your transition was the "A Nation at Risk" report.

AT: Oh, yes, absolutely.

MT: So, reflect a little bit. I mean, you said, Kansans want to do better. I often note the Constitution itself, we shall have a system of education for improvement. Educational improvement, that's always there. How did communities respond? What were some of the issues that you were dealing with as you were sort of trying to—we have these rising expectations, but we also have to deal with budgets. We may not have the money. Were there any things that you kind of reflect on that were important there.

A: Okay. A couple of things I mentioned. First of all, one other issue that we've had is second-language students. When I was school superintendent in Satanta, I believe it was the mid-seventies, we had 25 percent of our students [for]whom English was their second language. So, we had second language issues. What extra do we do to help that kid?

And then we had special ed issues. I think the co-ops and the interlocals were responses to "How do we afford this?" because each one of them couldn't afford it on their own. And, of course, once you've said, "This should be better," that we should serve this kid, the research started coming. Then they're saying, "Here's something you need to be doing." Well, we hadn't thought of that. We weren't researching. We hadn't looked at that that hard. So, that puts extra pressure on you to try to say, "How do we offer the opportunities that are the quality opportunities we know now with the budgets we have and the configuration we have?"

Nation at Risk especially, and you'll remember we had Doc Haderlein on that—

 

MT: For viewers who may not be familiar, Dr. Robert Haderlein was a school board member in Girard.

AT: Right.

MT: He had been the president of KASB. He was also the president of the National School Board Association and chaired that group that was appointed in the Reagan administration.

AT: Right.

MT: That's why we always talk about Doctor Haderlein. How did that affect you?

AT: Well, the schools—once again, when I started teaching, the big issue was offering them the opportunity to go to school. As we started increasing the expectations of who we should serve, then we started saying, "What do you think a kid who has Down Syndrome should learn?"

And Mark knows that I used to say these things when I'd be out, you had to shift your mindset. It wasn't just about offering an opportunity for them to be in the building. Now it's, "How do you help them learn more?" That was the next step in my opinion because then remember, it had a specific thing about you needed four years of English and three years of math, and I mean, it really increased your concept of rigor for them.

And out of that group then, as you know, the standards movement. This to me just makes all kinds of sense. Before you-were trying to offer them the opportunity to be there. Now you're saying, "We've got to make this more rigorous?" Well, what is it that you actually want them to learn? Well, you've got to identify that, and that's where the standards movement started. Once again, Kansas was trying to do that early, I can't remember, about the late eighties, maybe, early nineties. We were beginning to develop standards.

We even had an early competency assessment of minimum competency assessments in the early eighties, even in Kansas. Of course, those weren't based on a set of common standards that had been developed. So, during the time I was there, of course, we were developing a set of assessments. We were already implementing some state assessments based on those standards.

And we were also thinking about—I don't know if you and I were talking about this—adaptive assessments. These would be—do you remember a kid would go and say, "I already know how to do that. I don't need to do that thirty times." Well, these adaptive assessments would go and test you on this. If you usually could handle that, it would jump you to do a little harder, and you didn't have to take as many of those to identify what you now know. So, I don't know where they are on that because, once again, I've been out of that for a while. But to me, it was an example of "This made this had to be better," and then we said, "Oh, we've learned that. How do we make this happen?" So, we're still learning a lot. We still have kids who have difficulty learning, and we haven't found the exact things to help them as well as they should.

MT: Right.

 

AT: Then another one, one other thing, and I'll get off that, that I thought about that really—I want you to think about this scenario. In 2020, and I was retired, we asked thirty-some thousand teachers, "Go home and teach from home." And then we would wonder why some kids didn't learn quite as well the next year. I mean, come on. We had an event. There was a pause in that. Everybody would be comfortable in doing it, knowing how to follow and do those things. So, I would say that event also made some difference that now I think the schools are probably working hard to try to move out of that.

MT: That's right. Certainly, the COVID experience had a huge impact at all levels. Certainly, K-12, higher education as well that we're still dealing with. One other issue that I want to just mention before we maybe move along more into your role as commissioner, and that is, you mentioned funding, but I also want to think a little bit about equalization.

AT: Yes.

MT: So, one of the things that was also the story of the eighties moving into the nineties and ultimately the '92 School Reform Act was the fact that local resources are very unequal. So, how do we provide an equal educational opportunity or hopefully something, comparable results with very little resources and the states' role in that.

What did you see? I'm thinking of the different districts you were at. They were kind of in different positions on that issue, and that of course was a lot that drove the '92 law. Can you talk a little bit maybe about what you saw or your experiences or reflections as Kansas moved first from the School District Equalization Act model to try to address that, and then even more of a larger state role or state guarantee in 1992, driven by a lawsuit.

AT: Yes.

MT: But with legislature that really in many ways rather than fighting it agreed to make it work and have some funding. What are your reflections on that?

AT: Well, I was teaching at the time we had that first one in '72. So, I didn't totally understand that. Wealthy districts did though because they didn't want any part of their property tax going anywhere. I understand that perspective. But this really started—I think it fit with understanding how we served kids differently. It's a recognition that in serving those kids differently, you also have to look at what are the resources that school districts have for that. We used to use—who was it? Burlington and Galena, right? We said, "What does a mill raise in each one? So, how much would it be here?"

And notice, one of the things that I thought was unbelievable in our state is that we tried to equalize bond issues also for helping. I know that there were some limits to it, but I'm just saying. So, I think that equalization was kind of the next step and recognizing that 1) if we're going to try to help all kids learn better, we've got to somehow make sure that there is some kind of equal distribution based on their own ability to do that.

 

MT: So that 1992 act did a couple of very important things. It made a major effort to equalize both the funding available and the tax rate necessary to fund them.

AT: Yes.

MT: Across both operations and, as you say, looking at bond issues. But part of the issue of passing that, to put more money into the system was also adding in directives for a new accreditation system, standards and tests as we've talked about, site councils, longer school days. So, that law was very much about both finance and tax equity and improvement.

AT: In expectations.

MT: Exactly. So, that passed in '92. A few years after that, you became Commissioner of Education. So, I guess I'm interested in both your motivation to become Commissioner, why you think maybe you were chosen—I don't know if you want to share that or not—what made you the right person, and then you spent a number of years in that role really trying to implement those new expectations. Tell us a little bit about your journey and experiences, Commissioner.

AT: First of all, this was easy to say at the time, but I had known some people who had applied in the past who had also pulled out from that in the past, but I also felt like that was a place—I had a little different view in my roles when I was in leadership roles. Mine was, "Where can I get some things done? Where can I play a role in helping get some things done?" So when I was in a smaller school district, I was having to do all of these things also. So, it wasn't as impactful as if I could have someone help me in doing that. Do you know what I'm saying?

MT: Yes.

AT: So, in my view, this was a place where I could have a chance to have a broader impact in helping people, helping children learn, supporting teachers, and so forth. So that really was more my motivation probably. And, once again, how was I selected? I don't know. You'd have to ask them. I think maybe I was the only candidate. I don't know. I don't remember who the candidates were. But it was an honor, I mean, a major honor for me. I never believed I'd have an opportunity like that.

So, yes, we took it seriously. I was a believer in the standards. I believed that that helped clarify for us what we wanted the kids to learn. I never have believed we're there understanding how we help all the kids learn. So when others said, "Everybody can learn and learn well for all time," I'm going, "Yes, they may, but I'm not sure exactly we know how to do that yet."

So, anyway, we developed standards. We used all kinds of local people and smart people who developed social studies standards, who made decisions about when we assessed students and the period of time for assessment, the turn-around time. As you know, John Poggio and Doug Glassnap helped us design the tests along with some others.

But I also had one on accrediting university preparation programs because that's also a time when those standards changed. So we had a lot of—work with all those needs in trying to

 

identify how to make sure because we were trying to struggle with whether we should have a state accreditation only or it should match the national accreditation, and they all needed national accreditation so you could have interstate licensing.

So, that was a part, and also, we always struggled with preparation of teachers. We've always had difficulty, but, of course, it's more pronounced even now. I think last year, if I read right, we had elementary openings all over the state. We've had years where that never would have happened.

So, as you know, and I'm going to go ahead and get into this, in the role, we had some other social issues raise their head with us. As you know, one of the biggest issues that at least on the surface, here we have all these other things we're trying to get done, but one of the issues was the issue of evolution, teaching evolution in school. It's a logical discussion if you're thinking about developing science standards. So, we had board members who believed that we should be teaching that, and we had board members who believed that we shouldn't be teaching that. So, we heard more testimony—did you go to all of those?

MT: I did not go to all of them, but I was observing at a distance.

AT: It was so interesting.

MT: National, international attention.

AT: Yes. We had one time when we had people from all over the world there. It was so interesting. So, as a Christian, I believe God created the earth and so forth. I'm not as clear on when that all happened, and how God decided to do that. Others are clearer about that at least in their own view about what that is. That's kind of a separation line there because scientists use the big bang and whatever. And others say no, they limit the years. So, those are the kinds of discussions that were held there. So, really there was compromise in those standards, but it was more really a great learning experience, if you can live through it because it was difficult.

MT: And given that degree of difficulty and those same kinds of values or cultural— a lot of different things, but really it almost comes down to different world views. I think that perhaps they've become more pronounced. Again, you got through it. Do you have any reflections on what were some of the things—no one ever leaves completely happy on something like that.

AT: That's right.

MT: How did you manage that with the board? Do you have any reflections on how, for example, the legislature and others were reacting to that going on?

AT: Well, it's definitely when you take a social issue like that, you're definitely going to have people taking sides. You're going to have sides in the legislature and support. I think one of the things we used to talk about this a little bit, and I was reminded of this. I hadn't thought about it for a while. We decided we should take the high road. Now, that sounds a simple one, but it is critically important. So, no matter what your opinion, we valued you. We tried to honor that even

 

when we might have a disagreement with it or a disagreement over how they were going about that, and I think that's part of how you have to get through those things. The more personal you take it, the less happy you are, and the less you're going to be effective in doing it. You've got to find a way to let some of that go, the personal side of what you may have. And honor those who are in the position that have to take that and realize what you've got to do to help them make a good a decision as possible.

MT: I guess I'd also maybe ask you to think about—again, looking back, one of the things I think is fair to say when I was a youngster in this business, I think it was common to say that people didn't know much about the State Board of Education or what it did or who the people are.

AT: Yes.

MT: It seems to me that you also kind of coincided with the time, whether you were the reason or not, that the visibility of the board really increased.

AT: Yes.

MT: We're kind of unique in Kansas in having a constitutional language which sort of provides it a kind of a different and greater, if not incredibly well-defined power, and then the third thing is, whoever wrote the constitution somehow decided that having an even number of board members would be a good idea.

AT: That's right.

MT: What were some of your—

AT: Do you remember they tried to go to eleven once?

MT: Yes.

AT: When I was there. They couldn't get passed the eleven.

MT: That's the trouble of many constitutions.

AT: Of many of the constitutions. It's hard to do.

MT: Again, kind of looking back on some of those issues, I guess I wonder if you have any reflections on the visibility of the board struggling with those powers which sometimes the legislature isn't really comfortable with, and the board trying to figure out what powers it should defend and all of that, and then sometimes the further difficulty of the ability to be evenly divided and very hard for anything to happen. Were there some things around those issues that strike you?

 

AT: Yes. You're right on in that—you've got to keep the board who has some constitutional authority but who is—the paycheck comes from the other. Forgetting that in a way or keeping it at bay because that's where you're going to get your help.

Yes, I think one of the things that happened—if you've ever had one of these times when you are—I think about this. This is going to be an unusual example. I had a student who had done something incorrectly while I was a principal. I decided I needed to go talk to his parents. I went to his home, and his dad hit him, knocked him out in front of me. I thought, "What a dumb thing I did," a terrible thing. I could have handled this in such a better way.

What you find is that when that visibility came, we also had to then be advocates for what the board was trying to wrestle with. It had been easy to go, "Yes, I don't know what that board's doing. I don't know." Why would you do that? That doesn't help them solve anything.

So, one of the tensions was, in the midst of this tension, we had to make sure that the field wasn't getting mad at the board because they're having to discuss this. And you probably remember, we would go to school board meetings and talk about this because you had a multitude of opinions in those local school boards, too.

So, I think that was one of the other things you kind of had to work with was trying to help people, "Hey, honor this process. Honor these people who are here, who have been elected to do this, even though in some instances, you certainly don't agree with them.

MT: I guess as we're sort of moving through your career as Commissioner, another sort of landmark thing that happened was the No Child Left Behind Act.

AT: Yes.

MT: This, too, represented in my view, but I want to hear yours, another change because it was yet another increase in federal, maybe intervention, at least oversight. It certainly helped raise more visibility. And just that whole "Leave no child behind. We're going to get everyone to 100 percent concept." So maybe talk a little bit about your reflection on when that passed, how the board responded. One of the big issues we mentioned before, the '92 law set in motion a new accreditation system.

AT: Yes.

MT: And you had to make some changes, or at least you chose to make changes partly to accommodate that new federal law. What were the No Child Left Behind years like?

AT: That's a good point. I don't have all my notes here for this. So, that accreditation requirement, what we used to do is "Do they have the flags up? Do they have enough hours in the day?" or whatever. Now they want to know, "How are they doing on their state assessments?" Do you know what I mean? It was an increase in expectation of what you wanted to make sure they could do. Of course, we were in the first positions to go talk to schools.

 

I remember the two schools I talked to about being on probation. That was a discussion. Then when No Child Left Behind—the irony a little bit in this is that you had some group over here that didn't think everybody would be—that's crazy for us to think that all those kids are going to learn. And those same people would have loved No Child Left Behind for some reason. It could have been a political reason as you probably know. But, in one instance, it extends this idea of trying to serve more students.

So one way you might be looking at it, it looks like we might get some more resources to help more students. So, from that standpoint, but, you know, you had very reactive people about the federal government getting involved in that, and we still have today, wondering whether we ought to have had that federal government involvement.

MT: Absolutely.

AT: So, from our standpoint, we were probably pragmatic. If we're here trying to help more students learn and they're willing to give us some resources to help more students learn. Let's try to use those wisely.

MT: Tied into that, of course, I guess in my mind as I think back, all of that pressure at kind of both the state and federal level for more accountability, more testing. We want to know how you're doing, perhaps, paradoxically, created the record for a new round of lawsuits that were less focused on funding equity and more focused on adequacy is the term that is often used. The constitution says that funding must be suitable, and the Supreme Court over the years has said that must include both equity and adequacy.

AT: Adequacy.

MT: So that really led to the Montoy decision in 2005. That was as you were moving out of that role. Again, I'm just kind of wondering whether you had any reflections on the board's role, your role, legislative reactions to the fact. Now we've kind of created this body of evidence, and it's further raising expectations, both on schools and on funding.

AT: And on funding. The one thing on the adequacy was the issue—if you go to those who look at the budgets all the time, whether true or not, their phrase would be, "If they would have funded it each year, they would not be in this" because it was about what money have they put in, what money did they not put in, and so forth, and I think it's a different one, a different discussion than "Have we balanced out the opportunity funding for serving all kids?" Now it's "Are you putting enough money in every year?" and if you're not putting enough money in, then we're going to be right back into this."

So, I think that changed—I don't think there's any doubt. It changed the legislature. They got cranky, very cranky, on this one, not as willing to find a solution because it felt different, I think. But ultimately, they did. Of course, I knew about the suit. I didn't have to testify in that particular one. I had to testify in another. I just feel it had a different feeling to it than the other one. And as a result, I thought it was more divisive.

 

MT: I think that's fair. For good or bad, you were kind of leaving that world a little bit behind, moving more into the higher education world.

AT: Right.

MT: And ultimately going to work for another constitutional board, the Board of Regents.

AT: Correct.

MT: So, maybe talk a little bit about, I guess maybe just to start with, were there kind of any surprises as you moved kind of from one level or sector to the other, either at the institutional level or ultimately the Board of Regents. What was either a surprise or maybe a big difference?

AT: Well, first of all, I want to reflect, probably most people wouldn't notice this, all the community and technology colleges and Washburn were under the State Board of Ed. I think my take always—I do not know this specifically was when they changed that constitution, they basically said, "anyone who has levy authority or if they're getting some funding by the state or whatever. Well, it was in that period that we moved them to the Board of Regents. I would just reflect that we tried, we would work hard to give—the community colleges would come and talk to us, tell us what's going on, and what things did they need. They didn't have that much interest in coming.

When they went to the Regents, I always sensed they felt like they were the weak sister a little bit. And yet, they're a very important part of our educational offerings in this state. But I had already worked with them. So I already kind of knew them and knew the institutions. So I thought that was very helpful.

I have either taught or been to, worked at all six universities. So, that was helpful to me, although at that time, I had not done that with Wichita State, when I went there to help out. That probably was the place where I had the most to learn.

I want to tell you a little story, if you don't mind. Do we have time for a story?

MT: I think we do.

AT: They asked me to come and help. I said, "I'm going to run around and see those presidents, just to make sure they know I'm not totally nuts." So I remember seeing Kirk Schulz. I went into his office. He had a little old office. And the first thing Kirk said to me was, "Andy, could I take a week off?" I'm going, "President Schulz, first of all, you're not in Mississippi anymore. I'm not your boss. I work for a board that is your boss. And if you're going nine months and you haven't had any time off, you'd better look in the mirror" or whatever. We had a good conversation about it.

It was them learning how they were supposed to interact with this person. What is it going to be like? I'm sure it's different with Reggie Robinson than it's going to be with me —so, part of it

 

was just working with those university presidents and their provosts and getting to know their whole staff, leadership staff, going to the institutions and getting to know them.

But I think, you know, you have issues here. I'll tell you a couple of issues that we had, if that would be helpful.

MT: Yes.

AT: One I remember very well is we had a professor over at KU that had said something that was derogatory, and to be honest with you, I do not remember what it was. So, the first question was, did they use their own email, or did they use the university email?

MT: Yes.

AT: And then why do we have professors doing things like that? Here, we go. Same old thing. I was here when we went through developing a policy of conduct on those issues. We had lots of professors weighing in on that. I remember, as a matter of fact, at the time we were going to vote on it, I think we had to do it in another room so they could see and hear and all that kind of a thing, but it was another interesting deal.

When I got here, another one was the community colleges that sued the board. We had to work through how we were going to do that, and we had an attorney on the board right then, one of the best human beings that walked the earth, and he said, "I think I can help with that." We worked through him on our General Council, and he helped us get it solved.

We hired presidents while I was here. We had to let one go while I was there. It was the typical kind of things you have to do in these roles but having been in other leadership roles where you had to let people go and hire people, you kind of know what you're supposed to do when you're in the midst of those roles.

So, I don't think I found it that different other than you didn't have quite—when we had state board meetings, state Board of Education meetings, we would have press there. You would know. We'd have the School Board there. We would have a few people come and observe the board and so forth. When you have Board of Regents meetings, you have the President, Chief of Staff, Finance, Provost—I mean, there's eight or ten people from each one. There is a bunch of people coming to these.

So, in a way, I thought that was phenomenal because then you got to know them. Do you know what I mean? I just assumed they wanted to come and see what the Board was going to do. But that probably was one of the real things that I didn't count on.

MT: And that difference, I guess, here again, one of those balances we have is that the Regents, of course, are appointed, not elected, like State Board members. So, there's a different relationship with the Governor. But they directly control the state institutions, and now after that change sort of oversee the local institutions which have their own boards whereas the

 

Commissioner of Education, although the State Board has a direct role over the School for the Blind and the School for the Deaf—

AT: Right.

MT: Almost all of the K-12 constituency does not report directly to the State Board.

AT: That's correct.

MT: They have their own local Board. So, there is that. I guess that would be a critical difference. I suppose that's one reason that would show up.

AT: When you're a coordinating Board, there's a—it's a whole different kind of thing. But I think when you're a governing Board, one of the things you have to be careful about is to assume that someone did something wrong.

MT: Yes.

AT: I mean, it becomes easy to say, "What kind of place are they running down there?" And I say it in my mind sometimes, but I don't say it out loud because you have to wait and honor that president and do it in a professional way that then helps them gain a confidence and support because, hey, you've got college campuses. You're going to have issues. I mean, I don't care what it is.

So, one of the things I think was a good thing, I think this was before me, but I know we emphasized this, too, because I thought it was a good thing, and that is, we honored the mission of each of those six universities. We said, "They have a different mission."

You know, a general person might say, "You've got three regional schools and"—

MT: Yes.

AT: Well, not really. I mean, you just think about major differences in Pittsburg State and Emporia State and Fort Hays, and then Wichita State serving that aerospace industrial complex. I mean, it's amazing. And during the time I was in this role—boy, you talk about blessings—we have two universities that have generally been developing health systems people to work in the health field. KU is the major one, of course, but Wichita State to a second, another degree.

Well, the physician assistant program, for example, is at both institutions. But both of those institutions worked together because of needs, get ready, to help K State develop a physician assistant program. Wichita State, through leadership of who now is the president, Rich Muma, President Muma, helped them get their nursing program started by using the nursing program on that campus until they had their own program and so forth.

This kind of cooperation is just unheard of in other places. So, these places honor, they care about one another. They promote themselves vigorously, but they also work together I think

 

pretty darn good. I think a part of that is trust in them and from their standpoint realizing that's a high expectation then. You've got to keep earning that trust every day, and then that board being very professional on how they deal with them.

MT: That may lead into something I've been thinking of we've talked about, and I'm probably personally more familiar, the issues when you were with the State Board and working with the legislature and others, a lot of that was focused on the mixture of funding and expectations.

AT: Yes.

MT: Schools wanted more money. The legislature said, "Well, then we want to see results." And guided also by various lawsuits, that was kind of the story there. What in your time of the Board of Regents, what would you say was the reaction from the legislature, the overall focus, or maybe just a sense of direction of where things were going?

You've alluded to it a little bit. Maybe both specialization and cooperation maybe?

AT: Yes.

MT: What were some other things that you think was going on?

AT: I think you're seeing it now, too. They're going through a time, or they have gone through, I don't know the timing of this, and we were starting this, and actually been doing it before, but it became a bigger issue, and that is program review. And how many do you have to have in order to keep the program?

But this was a little bit of a kind of legislative dealing, getting into the weeds, but the expectation helps people pay attention. So, the Board was paying attention. We were trying to make sure that, hey, we had to look at, we kept records of the numbers of students, of graduates, all that kind of thing.

I bring that up just because this kind of tension that you'll have and people having that expectation helps them kind of keep focused on certain things that are important to the public. But like right now, I mean, the research productivity at these three—I mean, of course, KU and K State have always been extremely large, but Wichita State, too, now, the research productivity there and its tie to how it helps the business community in our state and so forth, it's unbelievable. And, of course, do you want an "aha"? That's an a ha is seeing the scale of this and knowing they played a part in this.

I remember one time when I was teaching there a little bit, I taught at KU. I went to the Opening Convocation. I was one of ten that showed up. I'm teasing. But, anyway, Chancellor Hemingway was there. And he said, "I've decided that one of our priorities has got to be eradicating cancer." I'm sitting there going, "Eradicating cancer? How are we going to do that, Chancellor?" I mean, I didn't know him too well.

 

Well, all of a sudden, we have a Cancer Center that has national designation. You don't have to go to MD Anderson unless it has a specialty they don't have. I mean, they envisioned this thing of need that your society needs, and they produced that thing. I mean, it's just—you can tell. I'm still overwhelmed and awed by it.

Now, everybody's concerned about the tuition, what it costs to go to college. I understand. So, the response from the institutions is comparing themselves then, a Midwest comparison. So, those are issues you're dealing with, and higher ed is always saying, "What's the cost of education? What do you do to make sure it's affordable?" In a lot of places, they're raising a lot of money for scholarships because they know they've got to find some way to help those who can't.

I just think there's a range of issues that—is it costing too much? What's happening to those professors? Have you got classes you shouldn't be teaching? Those kinds of things, too, are you producing that really is leading this state to a better place? And I think they are doing that.

MT: As we begin to wrap up, I guess I'll just ask you—we've alluded to that you did spend some time on the campuses, either as an interim president, as a professor, as a dean. I'll just give you a chance. Was there anything out of those experiences that you kind of wanted to comment on?

AT: I just think, you know, I think the interim president thing was just kind of a utility infielder kind of where they needed somebody. I was available. They would know me, wouldn't be as afraid of having it and didn't want to disadvantage a person internally who might want to run and try to become the next one, you know what I mean?

MT: Sure.

AT: Those internal things. So, that was a leg up for me. I knew most people on that campus. But then getting there and seeing them and having them help—that all was just so good. And we had major problems then. It's a college campus. You've got problems. You've got issues.

MT: Sure.

AT: But I would say that the faculty members and so forth—for example, Fort Hays. I'll give you one fun story. I promise I'll make it short. I was a superintendent in Satana, but I had a doctorate degree. Ed Steno at Fort Hays called me and said, "We need someone to teach a master's course" in whatever it was "at Seward County Community College. Would you be willing?" I said, "What night?" because I had all these—so, I taught for him.

And then he said, "Well, before you can do that, you have to teach on campus. We have a rule." So, I had to work with my Board, and my Board agreed to let me go teach three days on campus. Glenda and I stayed in the dorm. Then I'd come back and be the superintendent for four days. So, I started those kinds of things. Then after I retired, I worked a little bit with K State on their preparation for some principals, but a very small amount because then I had to go back out for one of the other duties.

 

So, I just think they're always looking for good people. They're always trying to make the place better. There's no doubt that athletics plays a big role in these. I was in the Regents when we thought that they were all going to split, and one was going to Mountain West, and KU was going to the Big 10, or the OU was leaving—that was before they actually did.

MT: Yes.

AT: That was a big issue at the time. I remember one meeting we had, I can't remember who all we had on the phone, but we had the Board in here on the phone, but they said, "By the way, KU and K State will be playing." I mean, that's a simple directive. But in the midst of your negotiations, whatever you're negotiating—

MT: Keep that in mind.

AT: Keep in mind you will be playing. You just get to know great people. I think in my life, the blessings have been not only having these opportunities but getting to meet all these great people. I mean, jiminy. I don't know how you get so lucky.

MT: Well, as you are lucky enough now to hopefully be doing retirement a little bit, I guess I'd like to wrap up a little bit by asking you to—I think my notes, you're supposed to talk about your accomplishments. You're modest enough—I want you to do that. I don't know how much you will, but maybe in a different sense. We kind of started this by talking about the change in expectations over this period of time.

AT: Yes.

MT: So whether it's your accomplishments or something you helped support, what are some of the things you think that are—maybe some examples of how we have either changed those expectations, raised outcomes, raised achievements over this—again, from when you started, the seventies and eighties, to where we are now, what you've observed. What are some of the big accomplishments that we've had? If you can talk a little bit about your role in them, that would be great as well.

AT: For me, the biggest issue is believing, taking a big leap and believing in human potential. We had a period of time—I'm going to take special ed for example, where we just, "That kid will never learn anything. He never went to high school." They had no opportunity to even go to high school. And all of a sudden now, we're believing that that person can actually learn more than what you ever thought they could before.

MT: Right.

AT: We've got another thing we didn't mention, which is this body of research that came up. As you know, once we were trying to make more students learn, then they looked at the results and found that girls were learning math less well than boys. So, now we have this body of research trying to figure out why that was. So, I got to be in the middle of a time when we were trying to

 

do effective schools, improvements, but it was looking at "How do you make it available?" We're still—mathematics, we've made progress, I think, but in science, we were still having difficulty helping girls get more interested in science in high school.

One of the things I think we're getting better at now, too, and once again, I don't know if I've had anything to do with this, but just this idea of linking what they're learning in high school to not only college, but also to work skills and things.

MT: Yes.

AT: I was just listening to a YouTube video by Jamie Dixon, the CEO of JP Morgan or something like that.

MT: One of those.

AT: But talking about how important our high schools need to make sure that they have some skills, it's back to that kind of work-ready skills and all. So, I think instead of just, "Can they go to school?" I think we see more potential in kids who before may have been disadvantaged because of their color, disadvantaged because of their second language because they have an identified disability. We're trying to say, "We believe they have potential and can add value not only to their life, but to their society." And I'm telling you, having a chance to be involved when that was kind of in its infancy, that would be the greatest feeling for me. We're in the fine tuning, continue to be in the fine tuning here.

MT: Well, I always remind people that for all our concern about the quality of schools and "Is college worth it?" and all those things, the most recent census data is "We have never had as many people in Kansas or the nation finishing high school, gaining some kind of credential, graduating from college." We've continued to move forward, but the challenge, of course, is we need more. We want more. We have that expectation. So, how do you continue to do that?

Well, you have had a long career trying to do that, and I'm confident you did play a role in some of those accomplishments. I very much have enjoyed talking with you.

AT: Same here.

MT: I'm sure people will benefit from this. Thank you, Dr. Tompkins.

AT: Thank you.

[End of File]

 