

CHARLES CURRY

October 14, 2003

Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is Tuesday, October 14, year 2003. We're in East Lansing, Michigan. I am Jeff Charnley, interviewing Charles Curry for the MSU Oral History Project for the sesquicentennial of the institution to be commemorated in the year 2005.

As you can see, Mr. Curry, we have a tape recorder for this oral history today. Do you give us permission to record the interview?

Curry: I do.

Charnley: I'd like to start first with some general questions about your personal and educational background. Where were you born and raised?

Curry: Ann Arbor, Michigan, was the place of birth, raised primarily in Homer, Michigan.

Charnley: Is that in Jackson County or Calhoun?

Curry: That's Calhoun County.

Charnley: You went to high school in Homer?

Curry: Homer, correct.

Charnley: What year did you graduate?

Curry: 1950.

Charnley: Did you see any military service?

Curry: I did. I was in the air force ROTC in college and served two years in the air force thereafter.

Charnley: When did you serve?

Curry: 1955 to '57.

Charnley: In the air force, what was your main job?

Curry: Well, technically I was as an intelligence officer with the Strategic Air Command.

Charnley: How long then did you serve?

Curry: Two years.

Charnley: What rank were you when you got out?

Curry: First lieutenant.

Charnley: Did you go on to college after that?

Curry: After the air force, I taught school for three years and then came to Michigan State to get a master's degree in guidance and counseling.

Charnley: I forgot to ask about your undergraduate career. Where did you go through that?

Curry: That was Dennison University in Granville, Ohio.

Charnley: What was it about that university that attracted you at the time?

Curry: My dad went there. Terrible reason to go, but it worked out fine.

Charnley: We're always interested in finding out why people make the decision to come to Michigan State. What were those circumstances?

Curry: I decided I wanted to get an advanced degree in counseling. I looked at the programs at Ohio State, Michigan, and Michigan State. Something that affected me profoundly later on, I

found that Ann Arbor and Columbus were willing to have me come, I was qualified, and Michigan State basically said, “We want you.” There was also a National Defense Education Act Guidance Institute going into effect in the academic institute, the first of its kind in Michigan State that year, so I applied for that and was granted a position in that. I was also granted a position as a graduate advisor in a residence hall, but I could not accept both. So I took the NDEA Institute, which granted me probably half of my master’s degree. It was only a one-semester institute.

Charnley: Did you use the G.I. Bill also?

Curry: No, just the institute.

Charnley: When you first got to campus, what were any of the first impressions that you had?

Curry: I was attracted by the looks of the campus. I had been here just occasionally, football games and the like. I had grown up a University of Michigan fan because my parents had roots there. I was in the first group of students ever to live in Owen Hall in the fall of 1960. I had started the summer school, just to kind of get a jump on the grad program.

The other impression was that the professors and instructors in the College of Education were pretty first-rate.

Charnley: Were there any in those early years when you’re working on your master’s that you worked with closely?

Curry: My advisor was Walt Johnson, and although I never had the good fortune of having a class from him, he was a terrific advisor and I remained in contact with him over the years.

Charnley: What did you see as maybe his strength that you liked?

Curry: His personality was just hail-fellow-well-met. He was just one of the guys and very warm. The other characteristic about him is he was nationally known in his field, had previously been president of the American Personal Guidance Association, so he was known nationwide.

Charnley: Did you stay at MSU all the time after that?

Curry: No, I got my master's after one calendar year and took a job as a counselor at a relatively new school district, Cherry Hill School District in suburban Detroit. It was in Engster [phonetic]. It was between Dearborn and Wayne, Michigan, Wayne and Westland. It was, I think, the second year of the school's existence.

The nice characteristic about that is my colleagues there, two of them had come out of the University of Michigan Guidance Program, which had a person, Ed Rayber [phonetic], who was very much like Walter Johnson here, his counterpart there. The Michigan people sort of supervised or oversaw what was going on at Cherry Hill High School, so they had really some direct consulting going on.

Charnley: Close links between [unclear].

Curry: Which was very good.

Charnley: In your counseling duties in some of those early years, was there anything that you were mainly responsible for?

Curry: No, we divided it. The four counselors, we had a very good workload. We were less than 250-to-1 in terms of ratio, which was, again, thanks to U of M, I think. The philosophy which came out of the U of M as was simplistic as you can get: "See kids." That was it. There's so many things that can buffer between counselors and kids, duties and additional responsibilities and so on that can get in the way of that. If you keep that in the forefront, that works.

We divided the kids up alphabetically, and the philosophy there was that you keep abreast of all the things that go on in grades nine through twelve, and twelfth year being critical because that's the next year before college or work or whatever, and so you're always up to date with that. The other thing is that by doing it alphabetically, you had all the kids in the same family, so if there were family issues and there was more than one sibling in the school, you could deal with it from more than one direction.

Charnley: Was that innovative at the time?

Curry: Not really, but it wasn't universal.

Charnley: Certainly logical in terms of [unclear].

Curry: Yes. You can argue it other ways, too, but I always thought that was the best way to go.

Charnley: Yes, seems to make sense. How many years were you there?

Curry: I just stayed two years.

Charnley: And next on your job path?

Curry: My ambition was to get a job as a counselor in an overseas American high school, and I discovered I wasn't qualified because in my NDEA Institute and master's program I'd never had the opportunity to take an individual testing course, in other words, learning how to administer a test one-on-one, which was a requirement of overseas schools. So I said I'd go back and get it, get the course and come back later.

In the meantime, Michigan State came calling and offered me a job. I'd gotten to know some people on the admissions staff. I had known the director of admissions, Bill Finney [phonetic], at the time because he used to officiate football games when I was coaching in Homer, and also met another man on staff, Russ Wentworth [phonetic] by name, who became my mentor. During my second year at Cherry Hill, they asked me to come to Michigan State and start work the following summer for an eleven-month contract basically versus ten-month and at less pay. It took me a month to decide on that one. It was a little tough.

Charnley: So what year did you start?

Curry: 1963, in July.

Charnley: You had family at that time?

Curry: No, I was not married.

Charnley: What were your duties in admissions in that era?

Curry: I worked in freshmen admissions, and the staff was growing at that time. We were in the Student Services Building, occupied most of the second floor there. So it involved visiting high schools, recruiting, covering college nights, handling correspondence, interviews, all of which was basically on-the-job training with some of the veterans there.

Charnley: To what degree did President Hannah get involved with that?

Curry: Indirectly, only through “Dutch” Gordon Sabine [phonetic]. He had assigned admissions and office to Gordon Sabine, I’m not sure exactly when, late fifties sometime. So his influence was well in motion, and they just wanted to build on the fact that Michigan State was now in a Big Ten Conference, had been for a few years, and it was time for the university to kind of meet that standard in terms of student population, quality of student population.

Charnley: Were you involved in any of Dr. Sabine and President Hannah's efforts to attract the alumni Distinguished Scholars?

Curry: Oh, intimately. Yes.

Charnley: How did you first hear about that program and/or work?

Curry: When I first got on staff, went through the first year of it. That program was just beginning to grow, and they were just starting the recruitment of National Merit semifinalists, so I was pretty much in on the ground floor of that. They had actually started the year before, and I first heard about that because a couple of the students at Cherry Hill, the valedictorian and salutatorian, were in that category and were recruited by Michigan State, and one of them did come here. In fact, both of them came here. So I experienced a little bit from the high school point of view and then came here and did the other end of it.

Charnley: It wasn't just targeting Michigan students, right?

Curry: No, they went national. Dr. Sabine got the idea that the National Merit Corporation was looking for more sponsors. All the sponsorships in that program were corporate, and sometime a year or two before he got involved, he discovered that a college in Vermont, Bennington, I believe, had somehow been allowed to sponsor a Merit Scholarship for one of its incoming freshmen, and he said, "Aha! Why can't we do that?"

So in 1963—and I'm trying to think whether it started—it was the high school class of '63 or '64, I think '63, he went to the National Merit Corporation and said, "Michigan State will sponsor 150 National Merit Scholarships," and the condition being, of course, that the student must pick Michigan State first before it can pick them as a Merit Scholar, meaning that the National Merit procedure calls for the students in the middle of their senior year to declare their first choice college and university. If they declared Michigan State at that point, then Michigan State could then choose them as one of their Merit Scholars. That's how the bandwagon got going.

Of course, we were also hoping to attract, and did attract, quite a number of the other sponsored Merit Scholarships, the corporate sponsors, and there's also a fixed number of National Merit scholars who are sponsored by the national office itself.

Charnley: How did you see that changing the student body in the sixties?

Curry: I think it changed the quality dramatically, because as you go through the sixties and through most of the sixties, counting the scholarships we sponsored, we ended up being the university in the country with the largest number of Merit Scholars on campus, more than any of the Ivy League schools, particularly Harvard. Of course, Harvard would always want to put an asterisk on it because they didn't sponsor any Merit Scholarships; they simply attracted all the others that they could. But the fact that a relatively unknown regional public university could get into that game and attract kids from across the country was phenomenal.

The Alumni Distinguished Scholarship Program was really a carrot. The reward for the winners was ten full-ride scholarships for four years of undergraduate education. But at that

time, it was just the ten awards. There are more now, and at a couple of different levels. But at that time, there was just the ten, and students were invited to the campus. They had to physically come to the campus to compete for these awards. The competition took place on the first two weekends in February. We split the invitee group into two groups because of the size, and at the peak of that, I think in the early sixties, we would have as many as eighteen or nineteen hundred high school seniors on campus, split between the two weekends, which was basically a Friday, Saturday.

The culmination of that was the ADS exam, which was an examination which our staff was never allowed to see. It was developed by the testing office in the University College at the time. Dr. Gwen Norell [phonetic] in the Counseling Center was instrumental in that as well. I was told that the exam consisted primarily of many of the toughest questions on the final exams of the University College required courses, ATL being one, and natural science, social science, and humanities, that that was kind of the core of the exam. So it was an MSU exam. It had only one purpose, and that was to discriminate among all of these very bright high school students, all of whom had to have at least an A-minus average and very high test scores just to get invited, and then try to identify the top ten among those to get those awards.

But the opportunity for those awards are what attracted the kids to the campus in the first place, and then once the kids got to campus, the campus sold itself to some extent. Of course, we made sure they had a chance to get contact with faculty in the fields of interest they had. By the way, parents were invited, too. There were some information sessions, and of course they had a chance to learn about the Honors College up close.

Even though you ran into a weather risk in early February, the kids, by the nature of the program and at that time, they stayed in residence halls. This is no longer true, but Michigan

State students were invited to volunteer an extra bed in their room. Maybe their roommate was going to be away for the weekend or maybe they had a third bed or a cot that could be put in there. So students were invited to host ADS students, and for a number of years that's the way they were housed. So they got an intimate look at the residence halls. Of course, back in the sixties that was a big building boom in residence halls here, and that certainly contributed, I think, to the positive effect. They got intimate contact with MSU students and faculty.

Many, many of these kids came that probably never would have come to Michigan State without any scholarship help at all. Now, a lot of them became National Merit Scholars, but of the seventeen to nineteen hundred kids who came in any given year, less than the majority of them were National Merit semifinalists. A lot of them were, but the majority were not. But they were all very bright kids.

So the other carrot to, I think, greatly influence the attraction of the kids was the Honors College, because I was told when I came here in the early sixties that when it was formed in the middle fifties it was unlike any other honors program in the country. There was nothing like it. People marveled at how the administration here got the faculty to agree to this fairly liberal kind of a flexible program which essentially told a kid who qualified for the Honors Program, "Here's the university catalogue. You may take any course in this catalogue when you're ready," including graduate courses. That's a degree of flexibility that just didn't exist, and for a number of years after that, there were visitors on this campus every year from other colleges and universities, finding out how this worked and what was going on, so they could try to copy it for their program. But it was probably another ten years at least before it began to have any rivals in other universities around the country. So when students who are that bright and want the opportunity to waive classes, to substitute more advanced courses for the required basic classes,

that flexibility was all there. They could go as fast as they want, although that was not the purpose of the Honors College. The purpose of the Honors College was depth, to get them to go really deep into their field or fields of interest, and that's why the graduate courses were opened up to them.

Charnley: How important was advising in the Honors College itself?

Curry: That was critical too. Of course, the Honors College, as it does today, had its own staff, and they indirectly advised everybody, but they advised directly the no-preference students, kids who hadn't picked their field of study yet. When a student had picked his field of study, whether it was at the beginning or later on, then they were assigned to a faculty person who was an honors advisor in that discipline and then they followed them through to their degree.

Charnley: Did President Hannah address those ADS applicants?

Curry: No, he did not, which is somewhat interesting, because later on MSU presidents did get more directly involved in the ADS program. But, no, Dr. Sabine was the chief honcho of all of that. He ran or mentored all of that program, National Merit, ADS.

Charnley: We should note for the record that he died just recently.

Curry: Just a month ago, correct.

Charnley: It seems to be an interesting legacy. How about some of the younger students? There was some attempt to attract some of those that came earlier than what they normally would graduate from high school, the really young, young students?

Curry: Not really.

Charnley: Were admissions involved in that in any way?

Curry: Yes, they were, but there was no attempt to attract them. There are, of course, programs around here today working with high school gifted students, but back then, no. But occasionally there would surface a really bright early teenager, and the Admissions Office would get involved, Dr. Sabine would get involved, Dr. Norell and the Counseling Center would get involved in what to do for that person.

There was one student here in East Lansing, and I can't remember the name exactly now, but who was allowed to come to Michigan State and take courses at probably twelve, thirteen, fourteen years of age. He eventually became a full-time student before really having finished East Lansing High School. I was told that Michigan State was never anxious to get any publicity for this kind of thing. They really didn't want this to be something that any parent thought they had a bright kid, they could send them to Michigan State. So the condition was that there would be no publicity from the university or the family about this student being here. Within his first year here, he was in *Life* magazine, courtesy of his parents, which did not sit well with the people here.

Later on, and I can't remember when, this might have been back in the early seventies, there was a young man from Ionya [phonetic], Michigan, and I can't remember his name. Gwen, Dr. Norell, would know. But he was so young and so small, his feet wouldn't reach the floor when he sat in the chair, but he was president of the National Honor Society, he was a senior at Ionya High School, and he was ready to go to college, and the question was where. His mother was a schoolteacher and his dad was a pharmacist, and Michigan State said, after considerable interviews and consternation, discussions with he and his parents, that he could come here, but that he could not be in the residence halls. He was just too young. He had to live with his parents, which meant his parents had to pull up roots and move, and they did. They came to the Lansing area so that he could go to school here. But he was so young that academically he was among his peers, but in between classes he had to go to Dr. Norell's office, and she would find little make-do work if he didn't have homework to do and keep him busy. She got him a job as a ball boy for the football team, so he went to football practice in the fall every day.

Charnley: Was that in the sixties or was that seventies?

Curry: That's, I think, early seventies. I'd probably have to get her to refresh my memory.

So those kinds of cases came along occasionally. Another student who came prematurely was the daughter of the Carolyn Knorr [phonetic] at the Beaumont [phonetic] Tower, Wendell Wescott, and she came out of Eastern High School. And there were some others. There was one who came here prematurely, like fifteen or sixteen years of age, as a high school graduate from Dayton, Ohio. He might have been a National Merit Scholar, I'm not sure. But he turned out to be a problem. There were social problems, and he got in Dungeons and Dragons and got

involved in the tunnel system in Michigan State University. I don't know. It was bizarre. I wasn't intimately involved with those kids.

Charnley: The activism of the sixties, how did that affect admissions? Did you see any connection between that—

Curry: I wasn't here at that time. I came in '63 and left in '68 to become director of admissions at Hope College in Holland, and the activism really peaked in that time I was gone, so I can't really comment very much about that. I'm sure it had some effect. I think, at least into the seventies, it eventually had an effect on how the ADS program operated. Students were not very trustworthy in some respects in terms of hosting MSU students, the ADS students on campus, and so we had to take that out and move it to Kellogg Center and other venues. But what direct impact there was, I couldn't say.

Charnley: How long were you at Hope?

Curry: I was there three years as director. In two independent decisions, not related to each other, I left Hope College and returned to Michigan State the summer of '71.

Charnley: Did you come back to admissions?

Curry: Yes, I came back to admissions. At the time, my mentor, Russ Wentworth, was leaving MSU to become director of admissions at Wichita State University. He took with him a

colleague and a staff member named Stan Henderson [phonetic], whom I had recruited in the first or second National Merit Scholarship class we ever had. I had the interview with he and his mother in my office. He came from a little town in Illinois. He came to Michigan State and graduated, went to Cornell, got a master's degree, came back to Michigan State to be on the admissions staff at the time I left to go to Hope. So he was here for the three years I was not here, and he followed Russ to Wichita State.

As Russ Wentworth went up the ladder job-wise at Wichita State, Stan Henderson became director of admissions at Wichita State. I also indirectly recruited his wife. He married a National Merit, a really bright girl from Lavonia [phonetic] Valley High School, and they came back to Western Michigan University. He became director of admissions there. That was in the eighties, I think. Was there a few years. Then he went to Cincinnati and was director of enrollment planning there, was interviewed for the admissions job here at Michigan State at the behest of myself and Russ Wentworth a year and a half ago, was one of the two finalists, did not get the job, which he says he wanted the job really badly, but he is glad it worked out, because he is now the director of admissions at the University of Illinois as of two months ago.

Charnley: Interesting job progression for him.

Curry: As kind of a sidebar to all this, the admissions staff at Michigan State in the 1960s was probably the greatest collection of talent in that bent anywhere in the country at any university at any time ever. Some of us got together for a memorial service for Dr. Sabine last week. Bill Finney, who hired me, died within a year of that time, but Russ Wentworth, as I say, went on to

Wichita State. Terry Carey [phonetic] became director in the sixties. He later became a vice president of Central Michigan University, which is his alma mater.

Our staff consisted of—at one time everybody on our staff, or almost everybody, had been in secondary-school teaching, most likely also in counseling or as a principal and as a coach. They had secondary school experiences. By the 1970s, you—

[Begin File 2]

Charnley: This is side two of the Chuck Curry interview.

When the tape ended, we were talking about the 1960s admission staff at Michigan State and you were commenting about most of the people at that time had secondary-schools experience.

Curry: By the late sixties and early seventies, a lot of the people we hired came out of the residence hall system in Michigan State, people who had finished master's programs and served as advisors in residence halls and so on, and that was a good source of talent. We got some good people out of that, one of whom, Tom Goodell [phonetic], who came back for the service last week and is now the executive director of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon national social fraternity, which is headquartered in Evanston, Illinois, he has served ten years in Student Affairs and as vice presidents at Denver, Virginia Tech, William & Mary. I'm missing one or two others. He's had quite a career.

We had a former state superintendent of public construction on our staff in the sixties and a graduate admissions. It was just a phenomenal bunch of people, all whom went on to bigger and better things at some point in their careers. That can never be matched again, unfortunately.

Charnley: Did you see change in the university in those years that you were gone away at Hope? And when you came back, was there any either qualitative or quantitative difference to speak of?

Curry: Other than the level of activism you mentioned before. I mean, clearly, that was different. At the front doors of the Admissions Office in the Administration Building, there were locks installed that could be triggered by the receptionist in case there was somebody that wanted to storm the office. There was a sit-in in the Hannah Administration Building at one point in time during that period, and they just wanted the ability, because of the security of the records and so on, to be able to shut the doors instantaneously. Certain people in the office had keys that could override that system or whatever. So you were sensitive to that, but other than just the general activism that the kids possessed, it filtered back to the high schools to some extent, but it never really affected the way we operated in admissions.

One of the nice flavors about being an Admissions Officer and dealing with high schools kids is you have something they want. They seriously want to be in college, they're going to be on their best behavior when they're in your company, whether it's one-on-one with or without their parents and you're in the office or in a group situation in the high school or in the college night program. There is an occasional exception to that, but not very much.

Charnley: My wife and I both taught driver's ed for thirteen year in public schools, so we know that. [laughs]

Curry: You had something they wanted.

Charnley: We know that feeling. The students that typically were troubled students, they were on their best behavior. Straight-As in driver's ed. So we kind of know that same feeling.

Did your duties change at all when you came back?

Curry: The year I came back, again, another couple of colleagues left. One had left the year I came back, [unclear] Kerr [phonetic], who went to Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City, community college, and was a vice president there and pretty much spent the rest of his career there, should have become president, probably, and never did. Dave Hershey was on our staff. He left the year after I came back, to become director of admissions at University of Texas at Austin and was there perhaps ten years and then became director of admissions at the Illinois Institute of Technology after that, before he retired.

When Dave Hershey left, he was basically—our titles weren't always very descriptive. There was a director, several associates, and several assistant directors, and then admissions counselors was the entry-level position. So that wasn't descriptive. But Dave Hershey was basically coordinator of freshmen admissions, and when he left, I took that job. So until I retired in '93, I was basically supervising the activities of the recruitment of high school seniors.

Charnley: Were you involved in the academic orientation program?

Curry: No, not directly. That program was run out of the Admissions Office. That was something that Gordon Sabine got going. In fact, at one point, when we put in a parents' orientation program in the sixties, it got us some mention in *Newsweek* magazine because that was a rather new phenomenon. Now everybody has it, but to include parents in the orientation process was pretty distinctive back then. AOP has always been around in the Admissions Office because of Sabine's initiative in that regard. It hasn't always set well with other parts of the campus, necessarily.

What our staff did was we monitored or moderated, if you will, the parents' side of the program. Once the students checked in, because orientation was basically a twenty-four-hour experience overnight, starting Monday and ending the next day at noon, and once the kids checked in, they were separated. The students went off to do their thing, and the parents collected—those who came—it was strictly voluntary, of course—those who came, this was mostly in Holden Hall, had sessions over there, and the admissions staff would take turns moderating those programs. For some of us, they were a lot of fun. You could have a ball with the parents, joking and kidding around. But you'd bring different resource people, academic, advising, campus health, the Owen Health Center, the campus police, the security people from the residence halls, would all come and make presentations.

When Dr. Wharton was here as president, he used to come over, whenever he was able and in town, and make some remarks to the parents, and that was impressive, the president of the university taking the time to spend a half an hour, forty minutes with the parents, even answering questions. He was terrific at it. He was just a great guy in a public setting. That continued, not through [unclear], but it continued to a couple of other presidencies.

So, anyway, that was our job as far as the orientation. There was somebody on the staff who was, in fact, the director of the Academic Orientation Program, and he or she was the chief honcho of that and hired the so-called Spartan aides or resident assistants for the program and so on to help the kids through it.

Charnley: In your duties, did you actually go out to high schools on a regular basis?

Curry: Yes.

Charnley: If you remember from the seventies, at any rate, what were the main pitches that you gave, emphasizing it? Obviously, our competition was Michigan.

Curry: Michigan. Out of state, of course, there were other universities, Big Ten primarily, that were in competition. We all had our little different ways of going about things and tried to make sure that new staff members never copied others but took good ideas from them. I always start talking about size. Size was sometimes perceived as a negative. This place was huge, overwhelming. So I would often start out dealing with size. If I was with an out-of-state audience—I used to recruit Chicago quite a bit—I would start out with just identifying where Michigan State is and show them a map of the campus and so on. Then I would talk about the physical dimensions of the campus, a mile wide, two miles deep, whatever, in terms of the academic portion, say, “How does Michigan State deal with that? What does Michigan State do to become a small university?”

Well, one way is the transportation system, the bus system, the bicycle paths, but one of the most important things is the class schedule. The fact that there's twenty minutes between classes was always a plus, because hardly any other universities did that. I don't know if they still don't. Therefore, you could talk to kids in terms of you could get from class to class in consecutive periods on foot. You didn't necessarily have to bicycle or use the bus. So that helped.

The fact that students could eat their meals, particularly lunch, in any residence hall on campus, which gave them a couple dozen choices of location depending on their schedule, was another way to deal with it. Then you talk about the two residential colleges, at one time three, Justin Morell, James Madison, and Lyman Briggs, all of whom Gordon Sabine was instrumental in getting going, by the way. So that for some students there was a place for them to have an environment that was not unlike a Kalamazoo College or a Hope College or something like that, without losing the resources of a major university, as Lyman Briggs' model became the best of both worlds. So that was a plus.

Then for the elite bright kids, you could talk about the Honors College, because that was another way you broke down the university for certain kids. You talked about class sizes. The percentage at that time of graduate students who were doing primary teaching was very small, particularly among our peer institutions. So you could tell kids they were getting the regular full-time professors even in the required University College courses. So you could spend quite a bit of time on that to try to be concise and succinct in doing so.

Then I would usually just make a segue by saying, "Okay, now that you all want to come to Michigan State." In the meantime, I would have talked about the academic programs, all the choice. Another flexibility item that was extremely useful here was the University College, the

fact that a student could start as a no-preference student, as probably a third to a half did at that time, and then proceed to change their major as often as they wanted to the first couple of years, and at least half changed their major at least once, I think, that was a level of flexibility. In pointing out to these kids, “Hey, look, you’re at a stage of change in your life, and we’ve got programs at Michigan State you’ve never heard of before.” I would use food science as an example. I would say, “In the freshman class, there will be less than six kids who will identify food science as their major when they enter, and we will graduate—,” I don’t know, whatever it was, a dozen, two, three dozen students four years later in food science. What happened? There’s a discovery process going on.

I also point out that that’s what the University College is for. That’s also a chance for you to become aware of and abreast of and in some cases get some depth on disciplines you haven’t had a chance to in high school, and that those aren’t just required courses. That’s your liberal education, if you will, your foundation for it. I used to use an analogy with *Time* magazine. I told them that when once I had gotten through my college education—and my family had always subscribed to the *Time*, and I always have since—that once I had that liberal education, I could then read every section of *Time* magazine and understand and get something out of it, because it’s compartmentalized—it still is—and it was fascinating to do that. So this is why you get a liberal education. Trying to make it simplistic. Parents liked it.

So then you’d move on, after you’ve talked about the university as an environment and then about the academic environment and the choice and so on. I would talk about the admissions process, and a lot of people in a lot of schools start out talking about that. If you do that at the first, I felt, you would turn off some kids. There would be some marginal kids and then they’d say, “I may be on the cusp here. I may not get in,” and they just kind of forget the

rest of the presentation. So you try to entice them into being interested in Michigan State and enhancing that initial interest they showed by coming to you, and then talk about the admissions process, and then explain to them that it was selective and how we went about it.

I used to use an axiom—and I don't know that I necessarily invented it, maybe one of my other former colleagues did—I called it P-cubed, Performance Predicts Performance, which simply means that your performance in academic subjects in high school is the best predictor of success in college, not the only predictor, but the best one, and therefore test scores are secondary. It is possible for you to have grades and records so good in high school that we would admit you without looking at test scores. And that would ease the mind of a lot of kids who were a little concerned about their test results. It was particularly useful on out-of-state kids, particularly in Illinois, because the University of Illinois—and may still, I'm not sure; Stan Anderson may change that—they have to be very selective. You have to realize Illinois has a population larger than Michigan and they only have one Big Ten university, flagship university, if you will, public, whereas Michigan has two. Therefore, getting into Illinois, which has a population significantly less than Michigan State, is extremely tough, and everybody wants to go there, so the selection standards are very high. So test scores are extremely important, as is class rank at the University of Illinois.

We were able to go to the Chicago area and say, “Look, test scores are secondary and so is class rank.” In fact, we don't even use class rank for admission, because class rank is determined by different methodologies in different schools, and rank can mean different things to different high schools, and it also doesn't necessarily reflect the caliber of your student population either. So I'd say, “We look at it, we're curious about it, but we don't use it, so it's your performance in your school that determines your admission, primarily, but the lower your

grades are, the more important the test scores become.” It’s an inverse proportion. It used to be fairly effective, and, of course, in the Chicago area, you can just see kids, when you’ve downgraded the importance of test scores, a sigh of relief would come out of about half the kids. They were amazed.

So you talk about the admissions process and who gets in, and then I would identify for them, although I had introduced myself by name at the beginning of the presentation, that they were looking at the guy that was going to make the decision. Because I was doing College Night presentation in Chicago area or Michigan high school, that was my responsibility, their application was coming to my desk. That’s the way we divided things over there, and still do, so that when you visit high schools, you get to know that high school the best you can, and the counselors, of course.

I just told kids, “I’m the guy that’s going to say yes, no, or maybe,” and that’s the way I described the decisions we made, yes, no, or maybe. Again, simplify things for them and make it very easy for them to understand. “Yes means we like your academic record. We think you’ll succeed at Michigan State. Welcome. You’re a Spartan.” Almost half the cases result in that pretty early. “Maybe means we’re not sure, we want more information, and we want to perhaps get another SAT or ACT score that you may have told us you’re going to take. More likely, we will defer a decision for second-semester grades, first semester senior year.” Did that with a lot of kids in those days, sixties and seventies and eighties. Don’t do it much anymore because the volume of applications and the caliber is such that there’s a waiting list starting by Christmastime. So it’s a different phenomenon than when I was here.

But a “maybe” decision, I used to tell them, covered a multitude of sins, and I said it also may be affected by the trend in grade. “We read your file chronologically, ninth grade, tenth

grade, eleventh grade.” Each year is succeeding more important than the previous one, and, therefore, since they were now seniors, this was even the most important year, or could be for some of them. So we would defer a lot of kids for second-semester grades. I used to tell them, “If you produce in academic courses, math, science, English, social studies, and foreign language,” and I used to call it the Big Five, I said, “the other courses, we don’t even consider. You’re talking about predicting college success, and courses that will best predict that are not the art courses, the shop courses, the phys ed. Fine. What is your grade average in academic college-prep subjects?” Then I would give them a range of where we were looking at as kind of a minimum, which is generally B-minus area at the time. Now it’s B-plus. And explained to them that the trend in grades from one year to the next, one semester to the next, played a part, whether it was an upward trend, downward trend, whatever. There was a message there. So that could produce, even though the record could be fairly decent overall, the recent trend might have been such that we would defer a decision. I told them we could have two kids with identical grade averages, and one’s not admitted and one is. It’s how you got that grade average, what’s the quality of your program, and what trend produced it.

So that was the admission process. Then you discuss financing education. How do you pay for it? You talk about the various loan programs and federal, state programs came into play, mentioned those and Michigan State’s own scholarship program. You assumed in a large audience you had a few really bright kids in there, so you talked about the Alumni Distinguished Scholarship Program very briefly. Back when we were talking about academics, I’d always throw in a mention of the Honors College. I don’t think my colleagues always did, but I always did. I always assumed, unless I had a small group and could read their faces that they weren’t that bright, I would tell them what the Honors College was very briefly. We always had

brochures on that stuff too. But talked about the ADS Program and what the opportunities were at Michigan State scholarship-wise and deadlines and so forth.

Then at the end of that I'd say, "Okay, you all want to come to Michigan State, you've all determined you can get in, you've all figured out how you can pay for it. Should you come? What about the decision-making process? What's involved with it? What role do your parents play?" I would try to emphasize in an audience that had parents that the decision was the kid's decision, not the parents'. The parents had influence in two ways: one, geography, and finances. That was it, and those could be very important decisions, obviously. But other than that, parents should stay out of it. Facilitate it, but not make the decision.

Charnley: Was your going to Dennison, did that come in? Did you think back to that? [laughs]

Curry: It was such a different world then.

Charnley: But a positive thing, sure.

Curry: There was no high school counselor in my high school. I didn't want to go to Albion College, which was right next door, just because it was too close. My parents had advanced degrees from Michigan, but although I went to football games down there, I wasn't really attracted to going there. I had no perception of the place in terms of size. But, yes, that did cross my mind.

I'd go through. I told them, "Don't choose a college sight unseen," which basically I had done. I literally had not seen Dennison's campus until I walked in there as a freshman. I said,

“Don’t do it sight unseen. Be sure you visit. If you’re not sure what the concept of size is, go visit a small college, a medium-sized college like a Central, a big college like Michigan State or Michigan and whatever, and visit more than once. If you’ve got friends on that campus from previous years who are students there, go stay with them in the dorm for a day or two, go to class with them. You’ll be welcome.”

So I just laid out a whole procedure to go through to make sure you made the right decision. I said, “We hope you’ll choose Michigan State, but that’s not the most important thing. The most important thing is you choose the place you feel most comfortable, and only you can decide that, not your parents.”

Charnley: You mentioned Chicago. You mentioned Detroit area. Did you have anything recruiting in northern Michigan or in the rural U.P.? Was the message different? Had you ever had any experience up there, or did you mostly concentrate on the larger urban schools?

Curry: I was suburban Detroit for most of the time. I did do McComb [phonetic] County for a while, and there were some rural schools there. Did some work in the [unclear] areas, which was rural too. Other than that, not a lot. I never did the Upper Peninsula until two years ago.

I didn’t mention this; didn’t have any reason to. I’ve been working part-time ever since I retired. I retired in 1993, and I have worked part-time at this university every academic year since for part of the academic year, but just part-time, twelve, fifteen hours a week. The last several years that has been in the Admissions Office and probably will be again this year, starting probably this week. So, anyway, as it happened, two years ago they lost a staff member very late in the summer, and that was the person who covered the Upper Peninsula. There’s a

big swing of about ten days up there, in which all the colleges all descend on the U.P. To make it efficient, there are College Nights every night and day up there, and so they asked me if I would do it, so I did. This is right after 9/11, of course. I'd never done that before. I'd been to the U.P., but I'd never done that trip, so I did. It was kind of fun. There's a different level of sophistication there, and, I don't know, I guess you could say for the most part kids aren't so full of themselves as they can be in some of the suburban areas.

Charnley: Did you see any differences in that, in terms of did U.P. students coming here succeed as a rule? We know our basketball coach has.

Curry: I didn't have a chance to really follow up on that. Good follow-ups really were just coming into play when I retired. They now have among their admissions tools that they use, a predicted GPA, which is based on a certain minimum critical mass of students over the recent years, perhaps the last six or seven, that come from a given high school and how they have succeeded in their freshman year at Michigan State. So when a student's application from one of those schools has that minimum critical mass comes to Michigan State, his high school GPA is factored into what the high school GPA of all the previous kids from that school was and what kind of results they got at Michigan State, so you can predict what they are likely to do in their freshman year at MSU. So you set kind of a minimum expectation as to what will be the threshold for admission. That's only one of the tools that's very helpful, and we didn't have that back then.

Charnley: What do you see, in looking at the breadth of your career, the challenges? Have they changed for admissions officers, not just at Michigan State, but just in general, or are they many of the same problems that you faced, or have they changed at all?

Curry: They're similar, probably. They vary in degrees. I would not like to be a so-called road warrior this year, I don't think, given the budget the university is going through, budget problems, the resulting tuition increase, and now on top of that, we learned today that there's another deficit in the state budget which could impact universities before the school year is out, and, indirectly, obviously, tuition fees next year. College is going to be a hard sell, I think, to a lot of families. Plus the economy isn't fully recovered yet, and you've got a lot more unemployed people around the state than you used to have.

A college education, kids still aspire to that and parents still aspire for the kids, but the finances are more critical, and financial aid is going to be a more and more and more relevant thing. You'll probably have to spend more time talking about it. I don't know. But as a consequence, I assume it's been this year, although I'm not in the inner workings of the office enough to know all this stuff, but I would presume that one of the biggest competitors for Michigan State this year will be community colleges, not the University of Michigan, because that will still be there, obviously. It's the Centrals and the Westerns, the community colleges there, because they're less expensive and more accessible in some respects for a lot of kids. And that's usually true. That's been a phenomenon over the years.

Charnley: In economic downturns.

Curry: In economic downturns, community colleges do well enrollment-wise. And when things are well, then the four-year colleges do better.

Charnley: You've already mentioned your retirement, 1993, you said?

Curry: Right.

Charnley: But that you were also working on a part-time basis. Did you have any university contacts outside the office that you maintained in terms of sports support or anything like that since your retirement? Were you active in any groups?

Curry: No, not really. One of my colleagues was Chuck Sealey [phonetic], who was director of admissions in the seventies, and he hired away at Michigan State, I'm trying to think, somewhere around 1980 sometime. He became director of admissions at East Carolina and then retired from there and moved back here to Lansing. I don't know if he's on your list of oral history.

Charnley: Might be a good choice.

Curry: He would probably be a good one, because he came in '65 to Michigan State, became director in the early seventies and then was here basically—

[Begin File 3]

Curry: —came in '65 and spent his entire career here. He retired a year or two after I did, a couple years, I guess.

Charnley: This is Dick Hensen?

Curry: Dick Hensen. Richard Hensen, H-e-n-s-e-n. He was sort of my counterpart in transfer admissions. He was coordinator of all the transfer admissions for many, many years.

Charnley: As you look back, were there any other colleagues or staff that you worked with closely that you see really contributed? Lots of times they're below the radar in terms of the official histories sometimes, and in oral history we sometimes have the opportunity to bring in the names of people who really have made a contribution over the years, whether they were staff members. Any that just come to mind? You mentioned some, Gwen Norell and Dr. Sabine.

Curry: Yes. Of course, you've already, I think, dealt with Katie Large [phonetic] in terms of oral history. In terms of local people, I know one that I could take you back to is Bob Fedor [phonetic], who was in the office in the sixties. He went on to become associated with one of the medical schools here until he retired, and he's still in town. We have a group that goes to lunch about every few months of basically admissions retirees, but some of them are outside the admissions field. But he would be one.

I guess Charles Sealey was the most important one in the seventies that I had mentioned. The reason I brought him up, and then something led me to—he was the person who was the liaison with the Athletic Department, and all athletic admissions, quote, unquote, “went through

him.” When he left, I took that over. So I was responsible for determining the eligibility as freshmen of all entering freshmen student athletes, following, obviously, NCAA and Big Ten guidelines on that, which obviously led to interactions with a lot of people in the Athletic Department and all the coaches. I got to know all of them to varying degrees. I don’t know many anymore, but there’s a few. There’s always turnover.

Charnley: How many years did you do that?

Curry: I did that till I retired, so basically twelve years, in that neighborhood, something like that.

Charnley: What were the big challenges there?

Curry: I always used to say that 10 percent of the student athlete applications took up 90 percent of my time. There were the borderline cases and the ones, of course, that really were questionable as qualified students whom the coaches desperately wanted to be admitted, and some coaches had more fervor in that regard than others did. Others were really more on your side than their own. Some were, you know, it was a matter of self-interest as well as success, particularly the more visible sports, the revenue sports in particular. But, no, you just had to deal with a fine-toothed comb with some of them, and some of them had histories you had to go back and trace.

Then there were the students who came from foreign countries, where you were dealing with foreign credentials, of which I was not an expert, so I had to use colleagues for that and that

helped. But there were some students who had experiences in more than one secondary school, and you had to track down the original records from all the institutions sometimes before you could certify their eligibility.

Charnley: Did it help you that you'd been a high school coach?

Curry: Probably not. It gave me an appreciation for it. I felt like I could relate to them because I had done that, but it was pretty minimal. I told Judd Heathcote [phonetic] when I retired, he called me up and said I hadn't asked his permission to retire, and I said, "Judd, I'm not retiring. My ambition is to be your free-throw coach." He had some players at the time who were not good free-throw shooters, and I felt I knew how to teach them. But he never offered me.

Charnley: It sounds like Judd.

In looking back at your career at Michigan State, is there anything that just stands out or that you see as maybe most important now that you reflect back?

Curry: What was exciting, first of all, it's an exciting university being it was growing, it was changing in the sixties, physically, and it was expanding in terms of students, in number of students, quality of students. As an office in the 1960s, we used to compare ourselves to the rent-a-car business. The Avis Rent-a-Car's motto then was, "We're number two, but we try harder," and that's what we said as an admissions staff. Michigan, you know, has always had the prestigious reputation based, correctly and logically, on their history and tradition, that Michigan

State didn't have. Michigan State, being the youngest Big Ten member, had a long ways to go. That was a terrific challenge.

Of course, having the Alumni Distinguished Scholarship Program, the Honors College, the National Merit Scholarship Program just made it exciting as hell to be doing that. It's not quite that way anymore. We even reached the point where we actually traveled on the road to recruit Merit semifinalists all across the country. We had a contract with the Holiday Inn for several years, and we would go to Holiday Inns in twenty states or so, coast to coast, for a week or two weeks' period of time in the fall and have meetings for National Merit semifinalists and parents. This is in the sixties and seventies. Just for them; nobody else was invited. That was exciting. We took a slideshow and did your sell job and hoped to get them back for the ADS Program. So that was a highlight.

Watching the university grow, it was just a dynamic place to be. Clearly, John Hannah had a lot to do with that in his years. It was always interesting to me that Gordon Sabine, who was the vice president of Special Projects and therefore oversaw the admissions business, and we all were in awe of him, he was an unbelievable taskmaster and an unbelievably creative idea man. There are probably only a handful of people with this university that ever appreciated what he did for it, and the history books will never reflect it accurately. The direct and indirect impacts of things he did here in the sixties are, to us, legendary, and this was reflected in some of the remarks at the memorial service. We were, as I said, in some respects in awe of him. He was so demanding, never demanded more of us than he did of himself. But he was, in turn, in awe of John Hannah. He thought John Hannah walked on water, and to have this guy that was just so bright and creative think so highly of his boss and what a person he was, so he always

bowed down to John Hannah. So Hannah was the greatest thing that ever happened to this place, obviously.

The other thing was the quality of people, the colleagues that I had. There are still a couple people who are there now that are good friends and were worthy of being on the kind of staff we had in the sixties and the seventies, as evidenced by what they did after they left here. Everybody, at one time or another, left here for something higher up the academic ladder or staff ladder, either if not here, other places.

Charnley: I'd like to thank you for your insights and the time that you've spent and for your contributions to the project.

Curry: Thank you.

Charnley: Thank you very much.

Curry: You're welcome, Jeff.

[End of interview]