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Van Faasen, Paul (biology) Oral History Interview: Science Professors at Hope College

Brian Williams

Interview with Dr. Paul Van Faasen, 1956 grad, taught Biology 1963-
Interviewed by Brian Williams
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BW: So you grew up in this area, right?

PVF: Yes.

BW: So you were familiar with the school?

PVF: More or less. Not really. I knew that it was there and such, but...

BW: Did it have any science reputation?

PVF: Yes.

BW: Is that anything that brought you there?

PVF: No. Back in the early '50s, I think people graduated from high school and went to college. For me, it was primarily an economic consideration in that I could live at home since we were not very affluent folks. It had a good reputation. I knew that it was good in sciences at that time, but it really wasn't really a consideration of my picking this. It was not as important a consideration as it was an economic situation.

BW: Did you come intending to go into science?

PVF: Yes, I am one of those strange persons who was not interested in all in being pre-med. My grandmother offered to pay my way through school if I were to go to medical school and become a doctor. I told her that I was not interested. So I came planning to be a chemistry major.

BW: Ended up doing both?

PVF: Yes, I did the chemistry, and then during summers and after school, I worked as a chemist in a local laboratory.

BW: Parke-Davis?

PVF: No. It was Holland Color and Chemical then. The lab director was going to retire in a couple of years and so people were jockeying for position. I watched them and from my point of view and decided that if that's what chemists did, I didn't want to be one. That may have been a biased point of view, but at that time it seemed valid to me. Well actually I was originally going to be a biology major, but the biology department at Hope was so pre-med that I became a chemistry major instead. But then after my sophomore year, I decided I was going to do biology, and so I took my intro biology my junior year.

BW: You had to work fast.

PVF: Yes, and I didn't get a major. I ended up with 23 biology credits.

BW: How about some of the teachers you had?

PVF: I had I guess all those old ones in chemistry. There was Vander Ploeg whom I enjoyed.

BW: Did he leave before you graduated? I know that he left somewhere about that time.

PVF: I don't know if he did or not. He might have left during my junior or senior year, but I don't recall for sure. But now that you mention it, I recall that there was a discussion about him leaving and reasons for leaving. I had Kleinheksel my sophomore year and Van Zyl for organic.

BW: Do you remember anything in particular about those guys?

PVF: Little Doc Van Zyl, I liked. Organic chemistry wasn't anything like organic chemistry is today with a lot of the stuff we know now. He had an orientation to

people who were supporting him. I think he was the only one in chemistry who was doing any research, and somebody like Petroleum Institute giving him money. And so, he did a lot of that kind of discussion in our organic chemistry.

BW: He ran a pretty active Chem Club too didn't he?

PVF: Yeah, I never participated in that. I don't know why. So I don't know about that. I think he was the only one really doing any research. He had money to hire students in the summer time, and offered to give me a job.

BW: I guess he is the one who really started that didn't he, that research?

PVF: I believe so, I think he's the origin. I needed to get the money to go to school, so I could make much more money working out in the chemical industry than in the laboratory. Biology people, I had some folks who aren't here anymore, who aren't well known. I had Oscar Thompson for several courses. Oscar was an interesting and fun guy. He talked as if he had lock jaw, and so you needed to be in the front of the class if you were interested in hearing what he was talking about, and getting stuff out of the course. But he was an interesting guy, and I think that I learned a lot from him. Alice Elliott was here and I had her for something. Phil Crook was here back at that time. He was very, very good. Phil Crook was the only one in biology doing any research. His program wasn't as big or as involved as Van Zyl's was, but he was doing some work. But research wasn't a very important component in anything that anybody was doing. I think it is fair to say that everything was on a much lower key than it is today. It was a just plain, different time. Life was different, conditions were different, and expectations were different. But, I think the

program in both biology and chemistry was good. It was teaching oriented, students got into good graduate schools and got into good medical schools. So all of that stuff that is still important was happening then. But the idea that an undergraduate school could be a good research institution wasn't part of the thinking.

BW: This was all in Lubbers, right?

PVF: Yes. Chemistry labs were on the first floor. Apparently, and you know how claims go, people suspected that from original discussions that the blueprints were held upside down when they put the building up. Or read from the back rather than the front, because they talked about having the lecture halls on the west side of the building and the laboratories on the east side of the building, so that the sun didn't come in lectures in the morning or in labs in the afternoon. But I think that the chem labs were on the west side and the bio department was the way I heard those discussions over the way the building was supposed to be.

BW: They had a set of plans in there that the building was going to be about twice that size.

PVF: I guess they built it just staying a step ahead of being closed down, or having parts not available because of war.

BW: Then after Hope you went to Michigan State?

PVF: Yes. Directly from Hope I went to work for Parke-Davis for a year as a chemist, and then was drafted and spent two years in the army. After that, I was at Michigan State.

BW: What was going on at the time that you were drafted?

PVF: Nothing.

BW: It was just policy then?

PVF: It was just a draft, yeah. So I was in for two years. One of those years I taught in a biological warfare post CBR school, which is chemical biological radiogical. I taught sergeants and officers who would then go back to their companies and teach their troops. And we taught delivery systems and recognizing stuff. Then I got moved to an Army chemical center just outside of Baltimore, and worked in the biological medical research director there. I worked in the compared physiology labs. And then went to Michigan State. I got a masters and then I was here. I taught at Lake Forest College for a year, and then came here for I guess three, and then went back to Michigan State for a Ph.D.

BW: How about the greenhouses? You started doing some experiments right when you got here with plants?

PVF: Yes, I was continuing some of the work I had done for my masters with Aster. I'm working in Aster today. I've been interested in that group. So yeah I did a little stuff, but...

BW: You came right when they built that new one?

PVF: They built a new one just...I think they started the summer that I arrived here because Dr. Crook was chairman then and he did send me plans, or one time when I was in town we talked about what was there and what they were planning to put in it and what I felt I needed. I should add also that Dr. Van Schaack was one of my teachers back in those days. She had her medical problems. She would forget.

BW: Didn't you work at the green house on the Gold property for awhile?

PVF: Yeah I did.

BW: Or you were supposed to anyway.

PVF: This is one again that your going to have to be careful about.

BW: Okay.

PVF: Albert Buursma was the caretaker there forever. He had the greenhouse there and the gardens. He had ways of doing things that were different than the way other people were doing things, and it was extremely difficult to work there. We worked in a long, low greenhouse because it was heated and in pretty good shape. We just had to put plastic over the top to keep the leaves out. It was basically in good shape. There was a big one which needed some work on. We tried to get that one going, but again, that just plain never happened and they gave that one to the city. That's at Windmill Island now. That was a fine, fine greenhouse.

BW: We kind of outgrew that one didn't we that they built behind Lubbers?

PVF: Yes, well one of things they didn't think about but experience tells you, was that one of the things we did was grow some experimental plants and did some research out there, but we tried to grow plants for use in the laboratories. But a good deal of the school year occurs here during the winter time, and when it is really cold you can kill a plant carrying it from the greenhouse to the building. And so, until I learned to carry plants, I used to carry them in supermarket bags or boxes or plastic bags or something. But, yeah we used that. We did outgrow it.

BW: Wasn't there one built into Lubbers Hall?

PVF: Yes, it was just a greenhouse window with one bench at the end of one of the laboratories. I guess that's still there. I haven't looked up to see if it is.

BW: How about some of the biology faculty while you've been here? A few of them were here from when you were a student, weren't they?

PVF: Phil Crook was here from the time I was a student, and Eva Van Schaack. I think those were the only two. Coming back to school is tough. But I was out seven years and so that seven years was a pretty good break before I came back here. So it was easier to become a colleague after that kind of break.

BW: It would seem odd with Brink and Jekel coming back right after still with Van Zyl and Kleinheksel.

PVF: Yeah. So that was good. The people who were here were those two. Phil left to become chairman at Colgate University of New York. He got a very, very attractive offer. I was hired by Lubbers in his last year. So when I was a freshman faculty, Vander Werf was in his first year of president. There were some things changing then. Norm Norton was here for a long time, and he became chairman after Phil left. He really did quite a good job. When you change anything, there are always problems. There are people who have been here for awhile, and then Vander Werf was interested in doing more research. I think Vander Werf really pushed that. So when you make some of those kinds of changes in philosophy, there is always a rough time in accommodating those changes. I think that happened in virtually every department. And so Norton gets blamed for some of that. When he was chairman and involved in making that change. So you hear, depending on who you are talking

to, good comments or bad comments. A large part of it had to do with making a change.

BW: Where did Norton end up?

PVF: Norton left to be chairman at Ball State. Most of the people who left went on to better positions.

BW: Salaries were pretty low here, weren't they?

PVF: Yes, they were.

BW: Or still are maybe.

PVF: When you compare salaries here with most other places, they are pretty low. If you look across the state, they are pretty low. So he went on to chair at Ball State. Ockerse was here for awhile. He had come out of Yale, and he did research. He and Brady came here. Ockerse and Brady were the first biology people in that time to get research grants from NSF. Ockerse left to be chairman at the IUPU campus in Indianapolis. Chris Barney has been here for a long time. Rieck was here the year before I arrived I think, Rieck and Griej arrived. Rieck and Norm Norton had personality clashes. One of the reasons Norman Rieck came was he was a Hope graduate. And his position at medical school at Michigan was a strong, research component and he was not interested in doing research. He was hired under one set of conditions and the rules of the game changed. He had a tough time adapting to that. He never did adapt, and so there were some strong feelings there. Norm continued, well, he was hired to beef up the pre-med program. And that he did. He got the pre-med group really organized, and the success rate we enjoy yet today is

due to his work because he was a colleague of medical school people. He could talk with them differently than a person from a small, liberal arts school. He had to be the pre-med advisor.

BW: Who handles that now?

PVF: Jekel. Gene has continued to do a good job. Our students are still successful, but I think they're successful because of what Norm did. Norm could get a person into medical school with a telephone call. I remember one situation where a person did well on the written things, went to the interview and was not particularly articulate, and the interviewer gave Norm a call and said, "What's with this guy?" Norm said, "He has a tough time talking, but don't worry," and the person came out first or second in his class. He is a very successful person right now. Again, because Norm had spent years in medical school both at Temple and at Michigan, he knew all these medical school beings as colleagues. He was tough and demanding, but of all the faculty that I have known in this department, more students came back to talk to him then anyone else. I think that says something for the kind of ship he ran. Sometimes it was a reign of terror I think, but he was successful and I think the kids wanted success. A good deal of their success was due to him. He remained adamantly opposed to doing any kind of research ever under any conditions. But you can live with that.

BW: Do you think that's been important to Hope, the research? To Hope?

PVF: Yes. I think without the research Hope would just be another good, liberal arts school. And with it, we're one of the best in the country. We can attract good,

young faculty, and although it is becoming more and more difficult, are getting funded. I think that speaks well because we are competing with the university people. When you look at the total number of dollars in research grants generated in this department in the last years, it is an impressive pile of dollars.

BW: It has been pretty important then?

PVF: Yes, they're important because those people that have their work funded, gets them meetings, gets them published, it brings Hope recognition which means that you can do a better job of attracting faculty and holding faculty. I don't know how much that really influences getting students the research component. But the spin-off on it is that we involve students in research. And involving students gets them to meetings. We have our students going to national meetings every year. Not only the Tri-Beta, which is the biological honorary, but Barney takes students and they give papers at his national meetings. Gentile's students go to national meetings and has students go to local meetings. Cronkite's students have been to national meetings and given papers. Sometimes our students are the only undergraduate students giving papers, especially in Gentile's area. They may be the only undergraduate students at the whole meeting. Or sometimes there are a few others but they may be the only ones giving a paper. And so this kind of thing I think, having students involved and that word gets out and gets spread and that helps us to attract good, serious students. We have a reputation for being a good school in the sciences, and so we attract a whole lot of peripheral students who say, "I have got to be something, so I think I'll be a doctor." So they pick a good school and come here. We deal with 200 students in

our intro bio majors class and we graduate around 50. We deal with a whole lot more students than are going to be our majors. Not thinking at all about the bio 100 and the other science requirement courses. So, yes, we attract a whole lot of students because of the science reputation. That's good.

BW: The research part has really started since the '60s?

PVF: Yes.

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[start of side B]

PVF: In those annual reports is a listing of grants written and grants funded. Those are the two categories. During the three years I was chairman, it was something in the vicinity of a million and a half dollars funded total. I think it was that, but my recollection may be wrong. And then Kalsow moved which was kind of unfortunate because she wrote the grant while she was here, but was funded at the time she moved and that was for $700,000--a biggie. But those people in the department are very successful at being funded. We have students here full-time during the summer, this is our sixteenth summer. That generates a different kind of feeling that having students working during the school year.

BW: You were here under the time the Sloan grant came, right?

PVF: Yes, that was early in my career.

BW: Did that affect biology as well?

PVF: It affected all the sciences. It was the start of basically what is now our 111 course. We reorganized the curriculum with that, what is now our 111 course had it's origin

in the Sloan grant.

BW: When the field trips started for biology, was that important?

PVF: Yes. All these things phased in. There was a lot of interest or awakening interest in field biology and things ecological in the '60s, and so it was a very popular thing to do then. The recycling movements began then, and there was a great deal of interest in it and so. Eldon--I didn't mention Eldon--he has been an important part in the department also. Eldon and I, being the two primary people, organized some trips. We would go to Florida for spring break. Driving down, living in tents and doing our own cooking, and get students into some new environments. Then Brady came several times. These were not for credit and totally paid for by the students. They were great opportunities to do some biology. We figured they were study field trips, and we would get up early and go birding and worked all day doing biology. They were a different path and very different from the department, because the department had been so pre-med. Instead of a pre-med department, biology department, it attracted more and different kinds of students. Those were important at that time. Then as those of us who did those courses had families and different kinds of obligations and different student interests, we did fewer of those of trips. Ten years ago, Eldon and I started again with the May term field studies course. That went for awhile and again satisfied their need. Some students weren't being satisfied. So again that kind of cycled out. We haven't offered that course in a couple of years. Brady still does one. One year he goes to Texas and alternate years he goes to Florida doing invertebrate biology. He has managed to get half a dozen or so

students to go each year. Part of the difficulty in that also was financial. In order for two of us on full salary, and May term, they told us that we would have to have 16 students, we did run it with 14. So if you get 10 students, you don't draw two full salaries, and it becomes difficult to do.

BW: Do you still have that Patterson Prize here?

PVF: Yes. It is funded by the Patterson fund, which was started in donations in memory of Dr. Patterson, and he was really a legend.

BW: Do you think that Vander Werf ever put too much emphasis on science, with the grants? He kind of has that reputation. I guess if you talk to someone in humanities...

PVF: What I think is that those criticisms are unfair. People who talk about all this stuff that the sciences have. If you look at where we got it, a lot of it is on grant money. If you look at why we got it, it is because a lot of people over here work really hard. And they are successful. So, in my opinion, that fact that he favored the sciences is not right. He knew the sciences better being a chemist. It was easy for the sciences to get money at that time. There wasn't the national endowment for the arts or humanities or such kinds of things. But those guys have some money now, so I won't say it's sour grapes, but I think the criticism isn't valid.

BW: That has been about the hardest part for me to sort out, the late '60s here.

PVF: Vander Werf hired young, vigorous people who were going to come in write grants and do research. And there was a lot of hiring and there were a number of people who weren't tenured because it didn't work out and didn't get that done. And so,

there get to be feelings about that. I think when you look at what happened in the late '60s, go back and find out when the theater was built. That's a first-rate facility, absolutely first-rate. When you look at facilities, the theater is a better theater facility than Peale is a science facility. For an undergraduate place, for faculty having office-lab complex like this is very rare. So we have a good one. But the theater is really great. That happened then. I think that what happened in the sciences was due to the hiring. And again Vander Werf hired young people who were going to do research and write grants. And there was that change. Take this in spirit, maybe not in words I'm saying, is that a lot of people on the other side of campus were people who had been there for a long time and change was not going to happen. And so rather than changing and gearing up, they spent a lot of energy resisting and not being constructive. I don't think Vander Werf knew social sciences very well or the humanities very well. It was one of the reasons why he had all those deans I think, because they could deal better with their own people. I think that it was more resistance than changing direction, going with the flow. It was self-defeating. Now things have changed and they have hired a number of good people who are doing good work in many of those departments. But I think that if you, I may be unfair here because I don't know, but if you take a walk through Peale and you take a walk through Lubbers, you will see a difference. It could be that they are off somewhere else in some library writing and researching. But it could be that they are not being active, I don't want to point an accusing finger because I know there is a lot of good work happening. But people in Peale, a large number of them are actively involved.

They are doing professional things during summer time, and they are doing it with students. That's exciting. It's exciting for the students and it's exciting for the faculty. It is a whole attitude difference. For what that's worth.

BW: There is one thing I have noticed like chemistry just had a series of long professors who have stayed for a long period, and biology really hasn't. Is there any reason or is that more chance? Because Hope has had Van Zyl from 1920-60. And then Brink and Jekel have been there a long time, Kleinheksel.

PVF: Well, let's see.

BW: Because Mast was here pretty short, and Patterson about 10 or 15, I suppose.

PVF: Van Schaack was here for a long time. She was...

BW: Fifty-six or fifty-five.

PVF: She was here when I was a student. I don't know if she was here before '52, or not. Could be a couple of things, that biologists just move more. I don't know of any particular reason for it. Norm Rieck was here from 1962 or '63. Griej was also in '62. And I was in '63. And Brady was right about that time. So there are three of us who have been here over 20 years.

BW: It is the same with math though, they have had Lampen for a long time, and then Steketee and Folkert.

PVF: It may have to do with whether or not they hired any recent Hope graduates really committed to Hope. And maybe it was that they didn't hire any recent bio graduates. See and this was a problem back then and maybe the reason why I became a chemistry major was because the department was so pre-med, that most of those

people went on to medical school, dental school. And they didn't crank out professional biologists. They cranked out physicians and dentists. That may be a reason. Or it may just plain be coincidence. But, I never thought about that.

BW: Most of the people who have been here longer went to Hope as students. Patterson came from New Brunswick, I think. And Vergeer was from Calvin, and I think Thompson went to Mt. Union, or did he just teach there?

PVF: I don't know.

BW: He went somewhere in Ohio. So that could be. That might be part of it. They didn't have that loyalty to Hope, I guess.

PVF: Yeah, and they didn't have because Hope wasn't turning out biologists. They were turning out physicians and dentists. That was the problem with the department as I saw it when I was student, and if they had a department that is today, I would have been a biology major from the start rather than a chemistry major. But when I was anti pre-med, our department was not what I wanted in them. When I came back, I decided that I could indeed take some courses while I was young, and non pre-med and be a biologist. But there were not very many organismal courses. Maybe the only organismal courses were the botany courses. There was physiology, embryology, comparative anatomy, and they listed biochemistry with a bio department course. What was being taught was primarily the hard core pre-med stuff.

BW: Do you think that the departments work together as well as they could? With things like biochemistry? Combine other fields that way?

PVF: Yes, we have a lot of double majors who come out and do something biochemical. I think that the people who used to be biochemists came out of the chemistry department. Now with molecular biology, I think there are more people coming out of the biology department. They are being called molecular biologists rather than biochemists anymore.

BW: In this department, since the '60s, it has gone up and down a lot. I guess it got up to 12 for awhile in the catalogs. Is that just the hiring of these young people?

PVF: There were 12 names?

BW: Yeah, a couple of times.

PVF: I could do better if you told me who they were. Some of them may have been part-time, and then you get more names than there really are people.

BW: Has it been steady or has it been like that?

PVF: I think it has been pretty steady.

BW: I think it was around the time that Dusseau was here when it got up to that. I've got it graphed out somewhere, the sciences.

PVF: It would be interesting to see the names Brian. Because when Dusseau was here we were in this building, and all the offices were occupied except for the one on the corner. That was empty until Kalsow came. And we didn't have people hanging around not doing something or not having a place to stay. So I don't know. I think we have been pretty steady. When I was chairman, we added a tenth position, and I had to fight like the devil to get that. But our teaching numbers were so overwhelming that they had to concede that we needed one more.

BW: When you were a student did they have the doctors come? There were a couple of doctors on the staff for awhile that just lectured part-time. Like in biology Kuipers, and somebody else. It was somewhere in the fifties, I think. So that would probably be that pre-med emphasis.

PVF: That's something I don't know about. If it was pre-med, I would have ignored it. And if it was after my time, I wouldn't have known about it.

BW: I found this over in the archives. Recognize that? Hard to imagine it is the same guy.

PVF: (laughs) Oh boy. Good grief. That's a long time ago. Those thin ties. They are back now. I should have saved them. Yeah I recognize that guy, I don't remember where that was.

BW: My dad pulled out a lot of things he had from college in there back in, he wore one of his suits down there, and all his ties. I thought you might like to see that one.

PVF: Yeah.

BW: Short hair and everything. That was probably from the Army huh, Navy?

PVF: I was in the Army. No I wore a crew cut, well, in the '50s, crewcuts were in and princetons which are coming back again. I think I basically kept a crewcut or shorter in the Army and when I came back, haircuts got expensive when I was a graduate student. I couldn't afford one. (laughs)

BW: My dad talked about going to the barber school because that was half-priced. Coming out with all the nicks...he got a shave there once which was a mistake.

PVF: When I was in graduate school, we had a guy in the lab who cut hair. So there

would be one night every two or three weeks when we knew Gerrit was cutting hair. So we would all go to lab at night. But then I just started to let it grow and it got to be much easier. And then during the sixties, you sort of had to let it grow.

BW: Oh yeah. Let's see, I'll finish with, I guess, what's the future look? Is everything going to continue?

PVF: For science, biology?

BW: Yeah, for biology.

PVF: Oh yeah. We're cranked up.

BW: The grants are still available?

PVF: They're getting tougher and tougher. Gentile's wasn't funded because his funding source is changing direction. They are changing interests. But I guess you could say, bringing up a hackneyed phrase, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

BW: Still getting the students?

PVF: Oh yeah. We're getting students. We're getting good students. We're more of a biology department then we ever were. We're attracting good students, we're attracting good faculty. Chris Barney just got $225,000 in a grant. The new people will write there in areas more molecular, I think have good opportunities to be funded. The number of majors is increasing.

BW: Are a lot of them going on to grad school?

PVF: Biology has changed a whole lot in 20 years. It used to be that we sent very few graduates, most of them went to medical or dental school. And to get a job with a bachelors in biology was uncommon. A couple of years ago, we had 12 of our

majors go out and get jobs doing biology. That was totally unheard of. They go out and get jobs like selling shoes or something like that. To get jobs doing biology and not selling. So some of those things cycle and more of them are getting jobs because of the greater demand for people with a bachelors. Sometimes we have a whole bunch go to grad school, sometimes a whole bunch go to med school. A couple of years ago, I think only one or two people went on to medical school. Sometimes people who are going to med school are chemistry majors, and many times because they don't want to take the bio core. To be a good biology student, you need to do through organic at least and probably biochem. At least a semester of biochem. And then you are close to a chem major. With biology, since we are a bio department we say you've got to take an animal course, you've got to take a plant course, you've got to take a molecular course, and then spread them. And especially in my plant courses, there are a lot of pre-meds who don't want to do that so they become chemistry majors and go to med school on chemistry. So what you see happening to bio majors is affected by the thinking of pre-meds. And it just goes. I think there have been more of those people back in this department, don't tell your father but we're a better department now than the chemistry department is, in my opinion and that may be biased.

BW: I am just a history major.

PVF: Okay. I think there are more biologists committed to their students in the department than chemists are right now. They are being funded. And again, that may be biased. So I think that we are getting some of those swing majors back in this department

again. A couple of years ago, I went for the annual report to make a list of schools where graduates have gone. I expected to see a wide diversity, and I was impressed at how big the list was and the quality of those schools. So our kids are getting out and into good schools, graduate schools, medical schools, and dental schools. In part, because we get very good students. In part, because they get a good experience here. But yeah, we are off and running. It is going to be tough to catch us. (laughs)

BW: That's all I have to ask.

PVF: Did you get what you wanted?

BW: Oh yeah.

PVF: Okay.

BW: Appreciate it.

PVF: Okay, happy to.

BW: Thanks for your time.

PVF: Yes.