8-16-1989

Reynolds, William Oral History Interview: History of the Hope College English Department

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CM: I wonder how you've seen the department change over the 18 or 19 years that you've been here.

WR: The most obvious answer of course is simply to talk about it in terms of the personnel. I think that the department is probably a stronger department now than it was when I first came. Part of that is simply due to the fact that over the years there has been a lot of good hiring done and a lot of the people who made up that good hiring are now at the top of their professional careers, both as teachers and as scholars. Part of it, I guess, would just be the younger people, since we don't have any real young people in the department anymore, younger group maturing into fulfilling the kind of the potential that led to them being hired in the first place. The other part of it would be that it seems to me what I've seen is the department being able to maintain one of its very real strengths in teaching and in personal contact with the students, including such things as offering independent studies in addition to having pretty much an open door policy for students to come by as well as extensive office hours for them, for the most part. Being able to retain that and at the same time, strengthen the professional side of what we do, compared to when I came. When I came, things like publishing an article were kind of unusual in a good sense, and hailed and supported, and that sort of thing. Now that's pretty much been changed, so that it takes a book to get that same kind of attention. People go about publishing articles and doing papers at conferences and things like that. Unless for some reason you're working with somebody on a project, maybe reading or critiquing
a paper, you might not know about it unless you're the chairman, people just publish their papers as a matter of course. I think that kind of professional growth on part of a number of people in the department has marked another very significant change that I've seen. I could go on and list all sorts of things, but I guess one thing would be that over the years, there has been more of a democratization of the way decision making is arrived at. Part of that is just a factor of our having so many tenured people now, so many people who are of the same age. When I first came, the full professors were kind of a group within a group, and the final decision making was done at that level. In a way, that made a lot of sense, I guess, because there were a lot of people who were in their late '20s or early '30s who hadn't had very much experience in the profession or at Hope College. But after we had all been here four or five years, that started to change, and has now changed in the direction of pretty much our decision making being decision by compromise, working on key issues until we find the position that if not everybody can support enthusiastically, everybody can live with, and then going from there. I guess those would be some of them. In terms of curriculum, that's easy, the greater emphasis on writing courses, particularly on creative writing courses. That's been a notable kind of change. In terms of the kind of literature that we teach and how we organize it, there hasn't been anywhere near the kind of change that there has been in the explosion of interest of both students and faculty in teaching both kinds of writing courses. So I guess those would be kind of the main points, I would say in answer to that.

CM: What do you think is responsible for the interest in writing _______?
WR: I can't tell you. I have a feeling that the interest in the creative writing courses is something that has always been there. In large part, you can point to individuals, since Jack Ridl has taught most of the creative writing poetry courses, if we didn't have somebody as popular as Jack, I would imagine that those courses wouldn't be taught as often as they are. So part of it is personality. The same thing shows up in a lot of other courses. If Steve Hemenway weren't teaching the Black Lit course, I don't know that it would be as popular a course as it is at Hope College. You see that in other departments. If you had somebody who was less charismatic than Boyd Wilson, I don't know that there would be the vast interest in courses in Buddhism that you find in that department. I have a feeling that the interest in taking writing courses has always been there, somewhat submerged. I'm not prepared to say that we're getting more students who are interested in it, or to say that the high schools have encouraged it more, I don't know. I know that once the interest started building, it developed a momentum on its own. As more people took courses and with the poetry readings making it more visible, I think the climate for creative artists on the campus in general has improved over the time that I've been here in the sense that people who are painters, or sculptors, or dancers, or pianists, or poets, there are more of them now. I think that begets a more comfortable feeling. I think that in turn begets more people who are willing at least to take a shot at doing that sort of thing. I don't feel like I have a key answer for why there has been that interest.

CM: How is the chairman's responsibility for hiring right now?

WR: I haven't done any full-time tenure track hiring in the two years that I have been
chairman. The last tenure track hiring that we did was seven, eight, or nine years ago. So I don't really have much of a sense for that. In terms of doing part-time hiring, the department has pretty much put it in the hands of the chairman and the director of English 113. When I was the director of 113 and Peter was chairman, I pretty much put it in his hands, and he has pretty much put it in my hands. So in terms of finding the staff to teach, and we need part-time staff, it's pretty much the responsibility of the chairman to do it on his or her own. Same way for the other part-time positions that we have for teaching business writing, for teaching ESL. Our ESL teacher resigned over the summer, Linda Ferrar moved to Arizona. It was clearly my responsibility to hire without involving the rest of the department. So at least at that level, the department puts its trust in the chair to do the hiring, not as a way of abrogating its responsibility, but as a way of, well part of it is just avoiding unnecessary work. If you trust the chairman to do that kind of job well, then the job will get done well without having all sorts of needless committee meetings. I can think back to the last time that we did hire on a full-time basis. The chairman does play a very key role here because it might well be that he or she would be the only person actually to conduct the first round of interviews. You probably know all of this, but I'll say it for the sake of the tape. The way hiring will work in most English departments is that in the fall semester of the year, applications will be solicited. You'll get a huge round of letters with people expressing an interest, and from that you decide which of those people you will ask dossiers from. Dossiers are what contain transcripts and letters of recommendation. From there you would whittle that
group still further, ask for some more information from people. From that group, you set up a round of interviews, maybe of twenty people at the MLA convention. You cannot be sure that anybody but the chairman would be conducting those interviews. Ideally, you'd have other members of the department taking part in that interview process. Depending on how many people who are part of that interview process, the chairman's decision or the chairman's input then as I would see it, would be half or a third, or a quarter, depending on how many people were taking part on the interviews. The fewer the people there are, the greater the chairman's input would be. Following that, it would be a report from however many people had been actually doing those interviews on who would we bring to campus. Following that, it would be a democratic decision making process on which of those people we would recommend to the administration to be hired. So except in so far as the chairman might have the ability to do some moral suasion or push somebody's case, that would be as far as it would go with the kind of operational model we have of how decisions are arrived at.

Is that what you are looking for?

CM: Is that relatively new to the department since you've been here, or has it always been?

WR: No. When I was hired, and when other people were hired, there was a lot of input, but it was the senior professors, the full professors who made the decision. That would have been the case, I think when I was hired, when Jack was hired, when Steven was hired. The only people who have been hired on a full-time basis after that have been Kathy and John. Both of those decisions were made in the system where everybody's input is equal. As far as hiring the interns that we've hired, that too has
been done in the same sort of way. So the idea of doing the shared decision making
does go back at least the ten years I would think.

CM: What about the interns ____________? Have they always been from the University
of Chicago?

WR: No. We've had interns from Notre Dame and from the University of Chicago. Notre
Dame, University of Michigan, and University of Iowa. They've been from those
different schools. I think in terms of what they have done for us, we've got an
awfully good mileage out of not paying very high salaries. The teaching that the
interns have done has varied as you might expect. You could say the same thing for
full professors, from acceptable to extraordinary. There have been more of the
extraordinary than at the acceptable end. So in terms of the kind of the service that
the department and the students of Hope College have gotten from the interns, it's
been a very good program. In terms of what it has done for the interns, I have way
more doubts about that. It has slowed people's progress down sometimes, brought it
to a halt. In other words, I don't know if it has been as good for them as it has been
for us. I have very real doubts about whether it would be wise to continue the
program, at least in the way it was originally conceived with a one year turn around.
Somebody comes for a year and then leaves, and is replaced. If we do continue, even
in the short term, I don't think we would want to continue it in that way. It puts a
terrible burden on the department to find somebody each year, year after year, to
come for one year. The pool of people who are willing to do that is not large.
We've been very lucky over the years to get people who were as good as we have
been able to get. Part of that has just been luck, and in Beth Trembley's case, has been the fact that she's a Hope graduate and has a family in Western Michigan, interested for a number of reasons in coming back here. The number of institutions who are in a position where they are willing to guarantee financial support for the person in the year following the internship is not large. Those are just some of the reasons why I think that the program is a worthy experiment, whose time may well have past. If we continue to make non-tenure track appointments, my recommendation would be that we hire people for two or three year periods of time and that we change the scheduling of when we hire so that we'd be hiring people in the spring semester for the following two or three years, rather than trying to find people in the fall semester for the following one year.

CM: The interns that I've known have all been here longer than one year. Beth Trembley will have been here for two years, and Fiedler __________. Why is that?

WR: Part of it is that our experience with the original idea just didn't work. The idea of sending people off for a year, in Beth's situation, she's making very, very good progress on drafting her dissertation. In her case it seemed clear that after this year she wouldn't be able to go back to the University of Chicago and support herself simply on University of Chicago money while she was completing her dissertation. She'd have to be doing something else. Now if that something else were going to be working in a factory, finding another teaching job, or staying at Hope, it seemed that staying at Hope, where it would be a way of encouraging her to complete her degree, much to the same thing with the Fiedlers. It was John who came as the intern. The
position was changed in his first year into a joint position with the two of them kind of being the intern. Since then, just kind of by force of circumstances, has continued with Julie first being an intern and now being a visiting instructor. Again, that has been something that has been good for us. I hope it has been good for them. John's progress towards finishing the degree has not been rapid. As long as the two of them are committed to John's finishing the degree, they have to do something while he's doing it. I think we've just represented the best alternative out of maybe a not very good crop of alternatives for them. Julie can't support herself just selling pins. If they're going to find someplace where John can have access to the library, where one or both of them can do teaching to pay their bills, why not at Hope College, since they've done a good job for us, and again, aren't getting paid very much. It has been a fairly easy decision making process to make. If Julie had been getting tenth percentile ratings on those SIR forms, those standard evaluation, then it would been a tougher one. But since she regularly gets 90s in every course that she teaches, and since she costs way less than a tenure track appointment, it has been an easy decision for me to make in terms of are we serving our students well. It has been an easy decision to sell to the administration because there's a very clear savings of money. So in both of those cases, those appointments have turned into longer term appointments just because of a particular set of circumstances. But the circumstances seem to me and to the rest of the department to be repeatable circumstances. If we hired somebody else, the circumstances would be different but there would be the same kind of circumstances that would militate against the person going off after a
year. So that's how that's happened.

CM: When did the internship start?

WR: I'd have to check the records, but it would have been after Jim Prins retired. It didn't seem that with enrollments being what they were, that we would then be able to defend replacing him with a tenure track appointment. So we needed an appointment to...we still thought that we needed somebody to teach the courses. So that's how that happened. So I would say about eight years ago, something like that. Maybe longer, but eight or ten years ago.

CM: What do you remember about John Hollenbach? You would have been at the end of his chairmanship of the department when you came.

WR: He was the chair who hired me, as a matter of fact. But the first year I was actually here, it was Chuck Huttar's first year as the chairman. In retrospect, I learned so much after I had been here for awhile about what John had done for and meant to Hope College, that if I had had any kind of understanding of that early on, I would have certainly understood John better. I think the thing that has always struck me about John, and particularly at the start, was his extraordinarily high energy level. For somebody who was as close to retirement as he was then, he just had an awful lot of energy and got himself involved in an awful lot of projects, and had showed great enthusiasm for each and every issue that came up. The amount of work that he has done after his retirement...when he was executive secretary of the presidential search committee just handled a mountain of detail work and handled it well. I think the energy and his interest in people, in individuals...When you dealt with John, you
always felt that he was interested in you as a person, wanted to get to know you better. There was nothing in it for him to go out of his way as much as he did when I was a new professor here. He knew that by the time I'd be up for tenure or anything like that, he would have been retired. His loyalty to the department, his loyalty to the college, and his interest in human beings are what led him to treat me as anything more than somebody who was just kind of going to be part of the furnishings for the next few years before he retired and moved on to other things.

CM: What did he do for the department? What did other people say that he did for the department?

WR: He did an awful lot of good hiring it seems to me. During his chairmanship, he hired some people who now are, in one way or another, among the leaders in the department. I think that's probably the most visible sign of what he did. In terms of anything else, I guess it would just be hearsay or my remembrances of hearsay. I think the hiring, in terms of what the effects of his chairmanship on this department today, I guess would be in terms of the people that he brought here.

CM: Do you have any idea of what Clarence DeGraaf's chairmanship was? It lasted over so many years?

WR: It lasted over so many years, and I really don't have a clear sense of what it was. He was chairman during the time when the college was growing and becoming a less parochial institution. He was chairman at the time after World War II, when the number of students would double sometimes within a month, and then double again. When people were teaching--unbelievable teaching loads. Virtually starting a course,
teaching multi-sections of the same course with the sections having started at different times to accommodate the needs of people returning from the war so that a new section of freshman comp would be begun as I understand it. Have you talked to people about this?

CM: No, but I've read it.

WR: That new sections would begin as soon as they had twenty people or thirty people to put in them and that sort of thing. I don't know what part Clarence played in hiring the kind of people that were hired. It seems to me that in those days, the president of the institution played a very much stronger role. So that for example, Hollenbach talks about having been recruited by Lubbers rather than by Clarence. I think there must have been someone who was doing the paperwork and who was providing the models for those people. I assume that just as all of us model our behavior in one way or another, either we imitate or avoid the behavior of other people of our peers, and just as I have learned to model my behavior, not just from the people of that generation who have already retired, but from my colleagues. They must have, that generation ahead of me, must have modeled their behavior on something, and I think it must have been on Clarence and other people like that who I have never even met. I think that kind of dedication that he showed and institutional loyalty, and without having any specifics to back them up, those would be the kinds of things that I would think would be at the heart of his contribution.

CM: Do you remember Betsy Reedy?

WR: Yes, I remember Betsy very well. What do you want me to say?
CM: Whatever you want.

WR: Betsy was an extraordinarily gifted teacher, one of the smartest people that I have encountered. The kind of decisions that she made were ones that were good for herself in terms of her own shifts of interest, her own personal development. I would have liked to have seen her stay at Hope, even if it would have meant that I would never had a chance to teach any medieval literature courses. But she has an extraordinarily good way of relating with students. I thought that she talked down scholarship too much. She wasn't interested in doing it herself. I thought she was awfully vociferous in her explanations of what she thought about scholarship and tended rather to throw out the baby with the bath water as far as that went. She had an extraordinary influence on some of our strongest students because of the force of her personality, because she is basically such a good person. Being a woman, she was able to, many of our stronger students then as now being women, were able to use her as a role model or to identify with her. End of comment.

CM: What about Jim Prins?

WR: I never felt that I got to know Jim very well at all. By the time I came, he had kind of moved into his latest or the last of his stages at Hope, where the enrollments in his courses had either started to slip or had slipped from the enormous levels that they had before, where he was disappointed about that, where he was disappointed about his feeling that the humanities at Hope had been put on a backburner at best, and where he no longer was as dominant an influence on the lives as many students as he had been. I never really, I always had the feeling that this was a man who was kind of
disappointed with the way a lot of things had gone in his life and in the life of the
institution. Someone who, feeling that way, had rather reached the decision to opt out
rather than to fight it. So I never really felt that I got to know him well. Period.

CM: Do you remember Jean Prothro?

WR: No, she had left before I came. Clarence retired, I more or less got Clarence’s job.
Clarence and Ed Brandt were on half-time that year. I was kind of the other half of
their appointment. Both of them retired in the June of ’72. My first year was ’71-
’72.

CM: Have you seen the attitudes of students changing since you’ve been here?

WR: I think kind of a safe answer would be yes. I honestly do think that there has been a
movement, first towards and now gradually away from a belief that if it’s not practical
and applicable, then it doesn’t belong. I think that Hope students have always been
more conservative than the student body in general, whatever that might mean. Not
having been here in the ’60s, I don’t know what the students of the ’60s would have
been like. I did teach some of the students of the ’60s while I was in graduate school.
There was more of an attitude of, if not of idealism, at least of a certain degree of less
pragmatism. I think the pragmatism of students is something that has, especially
during the late ’70s and most of the ’80s, kind of increased. I do see a movement
away from it in the last few years. Certainly not to say that every student is interested
only in the bottom line, or that students who are majoring in certain areas are
inevitably pragmatists, not to try and go that far. I do think that that’s been a real
pattern, our enrollments which had been going down and bottomed out have come
back up, certainly not anything like what they were a long time ago, but to a much more respectable level. I don't think you can try to adjust the curriculum or adjust the faculty, although both of those contribute. I think there has been a tendency among students to see the value of what you could call maybe the liberal part of the liberal arts education.

**CM:** What about the number of students going on to graduate school? How has that changed?

**WR:** By the time I came to Hope, the black death had hit English graduate programs. I was actually maybe the last class where people were getting hired in significant percentages early on in the process, that is to say would have jobs for the following year by February or March. Most of my time here has been during this period when, if somebody indicated an interest in going to graduate school in English, if a professor was going to be responsible, his or her first action had to be to say, "Are you sure? Are you aware that these are the facts?" Therefore, it's hardly surprising that for most of the time that I've been at Hope, the number of people wanting to go to graduate school has been lower than the number of people during the '60s. I think that's entirely reasonable. Why would anybody have gone to blacksmith school if they had known what the automobile was going to do to the horse and carriage trade. More recently, as either we have started to see the light at the end of the tunnel or the professional organizations have told us to hold on because there will be a light at the end of the tunnel, more people have been expressing an interest. Still, there are so many options open to talented people that I can understand, especially ten years ago, I
don't know whether I would have pursued a Ph.D. in English just for its own sake. Even today, people still have to act mainly on faith that there will be enough jobs in four or five years to absorb the number of Ph.D.s that will be created, given that not everybody is going to be able to have a Princeton or Yale Ph.D. I certainly have seen any number of students who I'm sure could succeed in graduate school who have thought about doing it and chosen not to. All I can say is that I think you have to do what is best for them. Our program probably isn't the best program in the world in terms of preparing future graduate students. Our program has to do too many things for too many different types of students. We have not chosen to make it a specialty kind of program that would attract just the one slice of English major type who is interested in graduate school at the exclusion of all of the other types of people who might be drawn to an English major for a variety of other reasons.

CM: What do you do to help students prepare for graduate school?

WR: Most of the time that I have been here, it's been kind of a moot point. We haven't had that many people who have been interested in it. Now that people are starting to get interested in it again, that's something that we've had to try to address. I think that the best thing that we can do for such students is to encourage them to let us know early on of their interests. One of the things that got changed in the catalogue for this year is to add under the section that says graduate study in English where it talks about guidelines for the English major. The last sentence has, "For further detail, students should consult the department chairperson, Professor Reynolds, as early in their college career as possible." That isn't going to do much good for people
who are chem majors for their first two and a half years or something like that.

(laughs) But we think that that's really the best kind of thing that can happen to a
person is for us to know about them as early as possible. Then you can do the kind
of planning that might prove useful. You can encourage such people, in terms of the
languages that they should take, in terms of courses that they might find useful in
philosophy, in terms of independent studies that they would want to undertake and
how they could spread those around and use them in balancing out the courses that
they'd be taking, the period courses and the major author courses. What Dr. Huttar
did in May is one answer to the __________ situation that came up last year. If
we know about people early enough we can encourage them to do the honors
program, where the kind of reading that could be done for the honors program might
be a supplement to or a replacement for that kind of a cram course that we did in
May. We don't know whether that thing in May was good, bad, or indifferent.
We're not going to know it until we've had a chance to talk about it with you and Zan
and ________, and not right after you took it, but in the course of the year. That
sort of thing. I think the best thing that we can do for people who are going to
graduate school is to get them early and to try to work with them on an individual
kind of basis to take advantage of what is built into the program that can help them
and then to supplement the program with independent studies. Ideally, we'd have a
bigger critical mass of people who have that kind of interest, the way physical
sciences do because of the kind of encouragement, the kind of teaching that students
can do for and with each other is immense. I remember I was part of an honors
program and lived in an honors dorm. When I started college, I had not really thought about college teaching as a possible profession. I didn’t have any clear idea. Part of what happened was just that I really liked being in college. It was very liberating. I went to a very good high school, very demanding high school. But part of what I liked about college was the freedom and part of it was encouragement to explore new things, the different teaching styles and expectations. Also, by living in that dorm and being part of the honors program, I was exposed to people who were juniors and seniors in that program who had made preliminary career choices of being college teachers, of going to graduate school. They knew more about it than I did, and it can be an infectious kind of thing, in a good sense. If you live in a dorm where you have a bunch of rabid basketball fans, the chances are that if you are at all interested in that, you end up going to games with them and become a rabid basketball fan yourself. The same thing happened to me in terms of career possibilities, that because I saw people who were interested in it, became interested in it myself, had that sort of thing reinforced because I was part of a larger group of people. There were enough of us that we could talk about literature outside of the classroom, find other people who were equally enthused about it, who weren’t doing it, or who were taking the courses, but who would never in the world think about the class outside of 11:30 to 12:20 Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and/or whatever other time they had to invest outside of class to complete the assignments. Ideally, that’s what we would like to do for our students, would be to find more students like that.

(end of side A)
CM: Do you think that the integrity of the department is jeopardized at all by the number of students that we have who aren't planning on graduate school, or aren't planning on careers in English?

WR: I don't think that integrity is an issue at all. The one group that you left out are people who are thinking about careers in writing. Certainly an English department has to be a department of literature and of writing. So, unless you're prepared to branch it off and set up a writing department, I think you have to incorporate those people. And no, I think that any department of a liberal arts college that exists only to send people on to graduate school ought to take a serious look at itself because it, in my mind, just goes against the whole ideal of a liberal arts education. A department that exists only to send people to graduate school is every bit as guilty of vocationalism or pragmatism as a department that exists only to prepare accountants who believe that an accountant needs to know how to do accountancy and nothing else. Or a chemistry department that believes that students should take chemistry and physics and math and disdains any distributional or core requirements. I would think that an English department that did the same thing, even though I'd be more tempted to overlook it in an English department since it would not be my own ox that was being gored would be failing to meet those kind of ideal standards. Just historically also, the nature of this institution is that it has turned out a number of people who have been very fine teachers at the secondary and primary level. And to turn our back on that kind of tradition, to turn our back on the kind of need that there is for
people who are well trained in that area, I think would just be a very poor choice. Even in terms of students who are taking English because they like to take English and are not planning on using it and who are not particularly directed in a career, I think that that too is at the heart of a liberal arts education, if the sense of an education is educating a person so that he or she has more than just a store of facts, does have a certain store of facts, but has a certain attitude toward learning, the ability to express oneself, the ability to think critically, all of those are key parts for an education for anyone. I don't think it would be moral, ethical, in tune with the history of the institution in terms of what I would think a liberal arts college in a Christian context ought to be doing. If there's anything that would jeopardize the integrity of the department, I think it would be too much emphasis on professionalism. If there is anything about the students that would jeopardize the department, it would be if we continually and regularly failed to attract strong students, no matter what they were planning on doing with their degree in English. That doesn't seem to me to be the case. We're going to have a range of students ideally. Each one of us selfishly might wish that the range were narrower and skewed towards the top more, but until that blessed day comes, you play with the cards that you're dealt, and you try to improve your hand as much as you can.

CM: What about the way that the department fits into the academic environment of Hope College? Do you feel like it gets short-shrift sometimes by the sciences?

WR: Every department would feel that, and every department in the sciences would feel that they get short-shrift compared to other departments in the same division. Biology
would feel that chemistry is the blessed one. Chemistry would feel that they really ought to get this or that piece of equipment. And why are the physicists getting this or that piece of equipment? I think there's always going to be that kind of tension. When you stop having that kind of tension involving a certain department, it's going to be because that department has stopped caring. I think that this is an institution that has limited resources. All institutions have limited resources. This is an institution whose limited resources are more limited than a lot of other institutions. You can only have so many stars in the galaxy. It's a difficult question when you have three science departments which are arguably in the top five or top ten in the country, but the number of students that they contact is minimal in comparison to the number of students that are produced by psych/soc, bus ad, and education. It's just not an easy question. Where do you put your resources? Do you put your resources into these star departments that are exceptional with a few people? Do you take the departments that contact the most people and build them up? Do you take the departments that are perceived as being the weakest and put your resources into there? I don't think it's an easy question. While I would have my own parochial answers, I would not see them as the answer, but rather as a part of some collective decision making. I don't think that the English department by any means is at the bottom of anybody's hierarchy. There are decisions that I think were not made well. We're sitting in a building which is one of them. But that was made in line with people's best ideas at the time. Their best ideas were not all that good in retrospect. But there we are. I wish that other decisions had been made about these things. I think it's unfortunate that we've had to
work buying computers out of the capital budget, two, three, or four at the year, that we still have people who don't have them even though we've got four more for next year. We still have people who don't have them. We have people who are, some people are on WordPerfect 5.0, some people are on WordPerfect 4.2. Two people are on the VAX, don't have PCs. I would wish there had been an institutional commitment along those lines. I think that the department has not fared as well as I would liked to have seen it fare in terms of tenure track appointments, in terms of faculty load. I think that this again has been done because people are faced with hard decisions. The department has grown as our level of students has grown, but it's grown with interns and visiting professors and part-time instructors. Our student contact hour load now is right around the college average. I'd argue that it should be lower than average. It ought to be lower than average because of the amount of writing that's involved in our courses. That means grading on the professor's part, that it takes longer to teach, teaching a world lit class of 35 takes more effort than teaching a blank 101 class of 35 when all of the grading is done by Scantron machines or by student assistants. Whereas in English 231, there are papers. Everybody has a certain number of papers. Some people give nothing but essay tests. Other people have essays being a component of their tests. I think that that's recognized, but I think again it's a question of trying to make decisions that are for the good of the institution as a whole, where you can't give everybody what they want. It's probably a better policy to give something to everybody than everything to a few and nothing to others. So I think it's our feeling that we're not treated unfairly, even if we don't get
everything that we think we ought to get. I don’t see a bias against us.

CM: What do you think is the general atmosphere among the faculty in the department right now?

WR: I think on the whole, we have a bunch of people who are happy doing what they’re doing, and happy doing it where they are doing it, and happy doing it with whom they’re doing it, who are happy with the kind of niches that they’ve carved out for themselves in terms of the balance between teaching and scholarship and service on boards and committees, and department committees, and things like that. There’s always going to be a certain amount of tension. At times there’s going to be a feeling that one thing or another is overvalued, or that Professor X doesn’t really appreciate what I do. By and large, I find it a healthy department, a department that certainly doesn’t need either direction or initiative on my part to the degree that a lot of the other departments do, a department that can use leadership in the sense that it can use somebody who has released time to try to look down the road a piece and bring to their attention things that otherwise they might not be aware of, that they might not have the time to be aware of on their own. It’s not a department that is an Empire Building sort of department. The people aren’t like that. We don’t have any one giant cause, aside from teaching, that we’re behind. It’s not as if we’re all interested in mounting some sort of Hope College seminar on something like that. There are times when people feel that, and I had it said to me that we’re a bunch of soloists and not really a department, that we’re just a bunch of people who happen to be together and doing their own things. My answer has been that I think that that’s overstating
the case. What we have are a bunch of individuals who are doing their own thing, yes, but who also respect the other people and the things that they're doing, so that if we aren't going around and applauding each other all of the time, it's not because we don't recognize that there are things worth applauding and people worth applauding. It's just that we don't expect that people are going to come and applaud us for doing our own different sorts of things. So that I don't expect people to be continually writing to the dean saying what a great chairman I am because I do these things and they don't have to do them, anymore than I'd expect somebody writing to the dean and saying how lucky we are to have so and so because he or she is such a great scholar. Or have somebody else writing in to the dean to say, "Aren't we lucky to have so and so and so and so because they are such outstanding teachers," or, "Look at the kind of committee service that somebody has done." I think we have a bunch of mature individuals who provide a very nice mix of strengths in a number of areas. That's the very best kind of department to have, is a department where people contribute in different ways, where you don't expect that everybody is going to fit one pattern, and one pattern only. So maybe I'm unduly optimistic, I don't know. I'll be interested in seeing what your history stirs up.

CM: What do you do to build community in the department? Faculty colloquium?

WR: We have faculty colloquia. We have department meetings. That's certainly a community builder. We have social things, pot lucks, things like that. We have the things that the social committee sponsors. It depends on how you define the department. If you're talking about the department as being professors and students,
we try to have social things, semi-serious things, that again we haven't enforced. We don't have a series of colloquium like chemistry and biology do where attendance is enforced. It would be an option, but it's not one that we've chosen. We've chosen more to say let people be as involved or as distant as they choose to be. On the one hand that looks like indifference, on the other hand, from where I sit, it looks like encouraging individual's freedom. I think that those are the things that I'd point to the most. I think that you can also encourage. I think that also there's a lot of encouragement given to community just by the way people conduct themselves in the classroom, by the sense that people do or don't have that people are approachable, that you can stop and talk to someone in the pine grove, or in the class, or that you can come by the office and expect to find someone there. From the instructor's side of it, I'm not going to presume to tell my colleagues how many office hours they have to keep or not keep. They wouldn't pay any attention to me if I did. I can't...there's no way that I know of that I could, even if I wanted to, tell some of the people in the department who come across to students as more cold and less approachable than other people, even if I wanted to, that I could tell them to change their spots. Without sounding like I'm abrogating all responsibility, when you have a department like ours that has the kind of mix of age and experience that ours does, you can't really expect to change the course of a department like that. If it's a department whose course is going in a circle, or heading towards an iceberg, that can be a real problem. If you have a department that is steaming along in a positive direction, then basically you just try to hold things together, and make things to be a facilitator.
CM: What about your own scholarship on detective fiction, your own interests? You did your dissertation on the *Quidius Moralizatus*. Are they related in some way for you?

WR: No, I don't really think they are. The other thing is something that I have kept coming back to over the years, and I am going to be publishing one chapter of a book on medieval attitudes towards myth, that will be coming out next year from the University of Florida Press. The detective fiction, well, let's say this, I really have to admire people who have been able to maintain a scholarly presence in areas like Jonathan Swift, Shakespeare, Milton, based on the kind of teaching loads that we have here. I found it myself impossible to keep up on the kind of reading that I'd need to do on Shakespeare, on Chaucer, or medieval literature in general, given the kind of teaching load that I've had. The detective fiction area has just been something that has always been a reading interest of mine. It's been a more limited area, so it's been easier to keep up on what other people are writing and what other people are doing. If I tried really hard, I could probably find at some very deep level, connections, deep philosophical level connections between the creative universes of detective fiction and science fiction, and the need to recreate the medieval universe with a very distinctive world view. I don't know if that would be anything more than an academic construct. I can tell you that when I came to Hope, one of the things that I was glad about coming to Hope, was that I was not going to be put into a publish or perish kind of situation. I can also tell you that over the time that I've been at Hope, my attitude has changed so that my attempts to do research and publication have become very important to me as a way of keeping myself sharp, as a way of challenging myself in
a way that I can't challenge myself otherwise in my courses. I can also say that I've never felt less able to maintain whatever modest level of scholarly scholarship that I've been able to maintain, I've never felt less able to do it than in these two years that I have been chair. If you've asked this question to Peter, he's probably told you the same thing, that he felt that during the time he was chair, there was less opportunity for him to do what he wanted to do in terms of scholarship than any other time since he'd been here. That's certainly what I find for myself. It's a price that I'm willing to pay. It's not as if somebody were asking for an arm or a leg, but it is a very real price.

CM: What about your involvement with the Popular Culture Association?

WR: That's something that has been a lot of fun for me. Part of the reason that's been fun is that the mystery and detective fiction section of popular culture has got a number of really nice people in it, and that's been a pleasure. But it's also probably the one place where you can most easily find other people who take your own work seriously. The work I've done on Dorothy Sayers has appealed to a certain group of people who share an interest in Sayers. But they're a little bit more amorphous, at least in this country. If you go to Britain, where you can go to a monthly meeting of the Dorothy Sayers Society, it's much less amorphous. But the detective fiction group is something that does get together. It is a network. It is a place where you can go and present a paper and get some serious criticism, be taken seriously more or less, even if you want to do a Freudian reading of Agatha Christie or something like that, you know, just to pick things that seem far out at the moment. It's where you can find
people who are interested in doing the same thing that you are doing, where you can learn from them. I'll say incidently, that I've always had a great deal of support from everyone in the department in terms of listening to my early drafts of papers on detective fiction topics. A lot of the support has come from people that...someone who didn't know the department might think that certain people who do scholarship of a more conventional sort, with the more major authors, would look down on this sort of work. It's never been the case. Some of my strongest support has come from people like John and Peter.

CM: What about any ......................................?

WR: That was one year ago. I've been to a bunch of NEH institutes and seminars, three at least of which have really been useful to me in terms of my teaching--one on Spencer, one on Dante, and one on Greek drama. If we had time, and if you were interested, I could show you exactly where certain things from the seminars have plugged in to the courses that I teach. So it's useful in that very direct way. Another way that it's been useful to me over the years has been, again, as a way of challenging and stimulating myself, I think that those things have been as important for my professional development and growth as a teacher scholar, as any of the papers that I've written. You get away from here, you get a different outlook on things. You come in contact with different people.

(tape speeds up and cannot be transcribed)

(end of interview)