

DR. WILLIAM KELLY

April 13, 2002

Jeff Charnley,  
Interviewer

Charnley: Today is Saturday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, year 2002. We are in the Union Building on the campus of Michigan State University. I am Jeff Charnley interviewing Dr. William Kelly. This interview is part of the MSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the university, coming up in 2005. Dr. Kelly is here on campus this weekend attending the first reunion of the Alumni Distinguished Scholars Program, and recognizing the founding of the Honors College in 1956.

You can see we have a tape recorder for this session. Do you give us permission to record the interview?

Kelly: I do indeed, sir. Thank you.

Charnley: I'd like to start with a little bit about your personal family background and educational background. Where were you born and raised, and where did you go to college?

Kelly: I was born in the state of North Carolina. I was raised in the Commonwealth of Virginia, where my father was a public school superintendent for over fifty years. I went to college at the Virginia Military Institute. I was graduated there in 1950 with a major, concentration in both English and history.

I did some high school teaching initially upon graduation and also was, in that year of 1950, expecting to do military service. As it turns out, I combined both. I was Commandant of Cadets at a high school ROTC unit in Richmond, Virginia, then returned to VMI for one year of teaching, and at that time won a fellowship through the Danforth Foundation to go off to graduate school. So under a Danforth Graduate Fellowship, I went to Duke University. I earned my master's and doctorate degrees in English, with a concentration in American literature. My Air Force service did come up. They were kind enough to give me a deferment until I finished my doctorate. And then I had the pleasure and privilege of joining the faculty at the Air Force Academy, when it was practically brand new. It opened in 1955, and I reported as a member of the English department and a young lieutenant in the Air Force in 1957.

Charnley: Sounds like rough duty. [laughs]

Kelly: It was exciting. Not unlike those early years with the Honors College here at Michigan State. We were cutting new ground, we were breaking old molds and barriers, we were doing things that hadn't been done before. Like, at that point in time, all the cadets at the Air Force Academy studied English for four years.

Charnley: How, ultimately, did you come to Michigan State?

Kelly: Well, I came to Michigan State just a few years there after. I left the Air Force Academy and active duty in 1960, went back to VMI, my alma mater, to teach for a couple of years, and then went off to a Modern Language Association meeting and learned about Michigan State and

what they were doing. I was interviewed and came up and was offered a position, and accepted it. In 1962. It was a historic date, February 20, 1962, because on the day of my interview, John Glenn was orbiting around the earth. There were piles of snow all over the campus from a recent snowstorm, but I was just struck with the place from my first moment here.

Charnley: That was some of your first impressions?

Kelly: Yes. So I was offered a post in the Department of American Thought and Language, which was part of the University College, and was just delighted to have that offer, and accepted it. At that point in time, I had one young son, and then ultimately three more sons were born during the years here.

Charnley: You saw in my letter that I teach in American Thought and Language?

Kelly: Yes.

Charnley: Who was the chair then? Do you remember?

Kelly: A man named Blackman was the chair, but he left that post for another assignment and the chair I really worked with for most of the year—well, all of the other years I was here—was Ben Strandness, a wonderful man. And Nora Landmark was another key official in that department. You know, it struck me, upon coming up here, that one department—my

department, your department—numbered more than the entire faculty at VMI, my alma mater.

[laughs]

Charnley: With someone else to teach the five or six thousand students.

Kelly: I enjoyed the opportunity to teach such a broadly gauged course. I thought it was very important that we were doing that sort of thing. And of course, like you, I'm sure, I was given stimulation and encouragement to work with people in the English department. Russell Nye, a great scholar in American Literature, was here then, and gave me encouragement, as did others in the department, to encourage my research and publication during the years I was on the faculty.

Charnley: Let's start with maybe some of your impressions of Michigan State students when you first got here.

Kelly: I was very much impressed with them. In the early sixties we still had an interesting balance of students, not only the traditional young high school graduates or preparatory school graduates, but there was a leavening in still-returning military service people, people who had either started and then stopped out to go on military active duty or maybe to work or do other things, but they were coming back as more mature students. So I felt there was a very good student body here.

It also encouraged me that they responded to those four general education courses in the University College. Dean Ed Carlin was dean of the University College then, and I felt gave

enlightened leadership to that concept. You know, I'm sure you've run into this, you always get a few students, "I didn't want to take this course," or, "I didn't want to take humanities or natural science." But by and large, I think they came out at the other end of those courses having developed writing skills, communication skills, and learning more about American culture, and that was pretty exciting.

Charnley: Students conclude the same thing today, and many times they come back, graduating seniors, and they ask us for letters of recommendation because we know them.

Kelly: One day I shall never forget—no one will ever forget—is the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I had an early afternoon class that day and had a break in the morning. My wife and I had gone downtown to shop. It was November, and we did a little shopping, looking ahead to Christmas. All of a sudden we began picking up hushed tones from people in the department store that something was wrong. So we got back in the car and turned on the radio just as Walter Cronkite announced the death of the president.

Well, I had an afternoon class and I said, "I've got to go home quickly. I need to look up some information on other American presidents and determine what this might mean. I don't know whether I'll have students show up this afternoon or not." But they did. The majority of my students showed up that afternoon, and we just had an open-ended discussion about this terrible tragedy in American history and others that had gone before, and what it meant to our culture and our society.

Charnley: We had a similar experience with the events of 9/11.

Kelly: I'm sure you did.

Charnley: We set aside what we'd planned for that day, and students were interested and concerned.

How was it that you ended up in the Honors College at Michigan State?

Kelly: Well, again, I heard Stan Idzerda say this, and Jim Pickering also said this just a few moments ago, that not one of us holds a degree from Michigan State, but Michigan State has become our alma mater. I look upon it as an alma mater because I came up here as a very young and untenured assistant professor, but I did earn tenure, I got other professional encouragement, and indeed, that's what led to the Honors College experience. Dean Ed Carlin, at the University College, had learned of a program which was a precursor to the American Council on Education Fellowship Program and Academic Administration, sponsored by the Ellis L. Phillips Foundation, and he said, "Bill, would you like to be nominated for that?" And I said, "I'd be highly honored."

So I won one of those postdoctoral fellowships, and spent an entire academic year at Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey. I was positioned in the provost's office, which adjoined the president's office. Great president then, Mason [W.] Gross, like John [A.] Hannah, one of the real titans, I felt, in American higher education. I was given various assignments, a learning curve, if you will, and the most meaningful one—and it sort of paralleled what was going on here at Michigan State—they were starting a new residential college called Livingston College. I volunteered to be the secretary for the planning committee. [laughs] I figured that's a

job nobody else would ever want, and so I watched that whole planning process for an entire year, along with other things, of course, that I did as well.

Upon return—this was '64, '65—on return in 1965, Stan was still the director of the Honors College, but it became clear shortly after that he was going to be leaving for a college presidency; The College of Saint Benedict in Minnesota. He is the one who hired me and I always felt honored by that. Then John Wilson took over as director, and John and I have been, ever since that moment, not only close colleagues, but very close personal and professional friends as well. So I worked with John from '65 to '68, when he left for the presidency at Wells College.

Interesting side note here. Stan Idzerda went to a women's college as president, John Wilson went to a women's college as president, and then I left in 1969 for Mary Baldwin College in Virginia, also a women's college. Howard Neville, who was then the provost, said, "I think it must be a condition that Honors College directors are planning to go off for the presidency of a women's college." [laughs] Actually, the next director, Frank Blackington, also went on to a college presidency, but not to a women's college.

Charnley: Not to a women's college. Interesting.

Kelly: And then Jim Pickering succeeded him.

Charnley: In the Honors College yourself, what were your duties?

Kelly: As an associate director, we had a very fine staff. As Stan was recounting, the staff in the early fifties, or mid-fifties when he started, was very small, but we were growing because the numbers were growing. So I was one of the associate directors, and a man named Bob Andringa was another; he was an assistant director. Then a faculty member named Bob Hammer, from chemistry, came to join us.

What we were finding, Jeff, is that we needed to spend a lot of time with individual advising and counseling with the Honors College students, because you know what the provisions were in those early years, and they've not changed substantially since. The students, of course, had to earn their way in on the basis of their freshman year experience here, earning a 3.5 or better average. But then all graduation requirements were removed and they could take undergraduate or graduate-level courses. We were trying to develop—and we spent a fair amount of time at this—working with individual academic departments to sponsor honors seminars or courses. And to the credit of our faculty, they had to do this not for any additional compensation; they just did it out of their love of working with bright students. So a lot of our time was spent with the individual Honors College students and a fair amount of time as well with our fellow faculty members. All of us held faculty appointments as well as administrative appointments.

Charnley: Were you teaching?

Kelly: I was teaching. I continued to teach at least one course in American Thought and Language.



Charnley: I'm teaching an honors section right now.

Kelly: Are you? Good for you. How do you find the students?

Charnley: Oh, excellent.

Kelly: How long have you been teaching here?

Charnley: I've been here since 1985, and I'm an alum in history. I was on the tenure system since 1991.

Kelly: That's great.

Charnley: I've enjoyed it. We have a rotation system because a lot of people want to teach, and it's still a large faculty. So we have to rotate, and it was my turn this semester.

Kelly: Well, you were privileged as a student here as well as on the faculty. They have some great people in the history department.

Charnley: Ed Williams was my mentor.

What contacts did you have with President Hannah?

Kelly: My primary contact was with Howard Neville, the provost of the university, but President Hannah was always there, especially after I became director. I found him to be always accessible, always willing to listen, and always wanting to make constructive suggestions or whatever about the future development of the Honors College program.

One of the things that happened from a physical standpoint was that we had been housed in the library, the university library, and the opportunity came up for us to move into Eustace Hall. So that was one of my very pleasant and challenging responsibilities, to help plan the physical move into Eustace Hall, working with all the physical plant people and others about renovations and changes which needed to be made in the facility. Of course this had to be redone and redone again from the technology revolution that's taken place. But that was pretty exciting to move into Eustace Hall, during that year, in 1968.

Charnley: How would you describe Howard Neville as provost?

Kelly: I would back up and say I think what—and this is what these people are saying downstairs—all more or less on a common theme. Michigan State University in the 1960s was the most exciting place anyone could be. Here were these residential colleges being formed, the living/learning complexes in the new residence halls, the Honors College. There were just so many things going on, and it goes back to the enlightened visionary leadership of people like John Hannah and Howard Neville and Gordon Sabine. Gordon Sabine even carried this title, Vice President of Special Projects, which we used to kid him and laugh about. That could mean anything. [laughs] That's what he liked about it. Bless his heart, he recognized Katie Large this morning, who worked with him. We had point people that we needed to get to, and she was one,

and we could always count on Katie. We could always count on Gwen Norell, at the Counseling Center. She worked so closely with our students and with us as faculty.

Charnley: I've interviewed Gwen.

Kelly: She's just remarkable. Most of them were recognized pointedly by Gordon Sabine this morning, as indeed they should have been. Along with Stan Idzerda—Stan is another visionary. Gordon Sabine said, "Three geniuses, I worked with." And it was Katie, and Gwen, and Stan Idzerda. And that's true. Stan was the visionary who could conceive how the Honors College might develop, along with Gordon Sabine. It was very much a team effort.

So by the time I came along, I was the third director, but had been on staff with both Stan—well, not as much with Stan as with John. But the program was maturing and just continued to evolve.

Charnley: The emphasis on student quality, coming in and developing that, seemed to be a big transition between the 1950s and some of President Hannah's—

Kelly: Well, we were recalling, sitting around the table earlier this morning, and then they've even talked about it in their presentations, I'm sure Gordon Sabine probably told you about these thousands of letters that would go out. And that was at a time when letters could still make a difference in the recruitment process. All this wonderful response that came back, just totally unpredicted in some ways. Over three hundred in that first kind of mailing that he sent out. And

at one high point here, in the mid-sixties, we had over six hundred Merit Scholars on campus, and most of them were in the Honors College.

This is why I say—and others have said this—looking back on a career as a full-time faculty member here and elsewhere, having been a college president at two different institutions, and then later in my career, I headed foundations and associations of independent colleges in Alabama through much of the 1980s and then in Georgia for most of the 1990s. And all of that, very exciting and rewarding, but no more challenging nor inspiring intellectual experience than the 1960s right here on this campus at Michigan State University. That still just stands out, and always will, in my mind.

Charnley: After you left the university, did you subsequently have any contacts with the university?

Kelly: Yes, both informally and otherwise. I'd known Jim Pickering as a member of faculty and I had known, of course, Gwen and Katie and others, and while I may not have actively kept up with all of these people, periodically I had an opportunity to come back to the campus. I've known outstanding people, like one of my former students, Jim Spaniola, Dean of the College of Communication Arts. We have remained very good personal, as well as professional, friends over the years. So when he was working for President [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.], I had an opportunity to come up here and meet President Wharton and sit down and spend about an hour with him, no agenda other than to just say how much it had meant for me to be here, and I wanted to let him know that. And he was quite interested.

Then Ron Fischer, in his role as the current director, has sponsored a couple of occasions like this one, which I think is superb. A couple of years ago there was another celebration for the founding of the Honors College and all the former directors were invited back along with some other special guests. That was a wonderful weekend. It was a fall weekend. State was playing Indiana and won in a double overtime. [laughs] Athletics were great here in the decade of the sixties. Of course, they've always been great. But it was a special pleasure to get to know, personally, Coach Duffy Daugherty. He was very supportive of what we were doing. We even had a couple of students in the Honors College on the football team!

Charnley: You did?

Kelly: We sure did.

Charnley: It's interesting, a lot of people know the idea that Hannah pushed football as a way to get us into the big time, but more and more people are learning that he also pushed academics.

Kelly: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Charnley: That connection, you were a fan of athletics?

Kelly: Oh yes. Oh yes. My wife and I went to all the home games.

Charnley: You saw the relationship to be a natural one?

Kelly: Yes, and we even went to a few of the away games. I enjoyed being part of a big major and great university, and, of course, in the sixties we were competing for national championships and that was exciting. Duffy was quite an interesting guy.

Charnley: What's a recollection of him that you had?

Kelly: I had come to know him a little bit through Virginia connections. He had a brother who lived in Virginia, Waynesboro, Virginia. I learned about that and just got in touch with him and said, "I'd like to get together with you sometime for lunch, when you don't have anything better to do." So we did get together at the Kellogg Center one day for lunch, and he was just as charming and personable as he could be. He was about ready, that day, to go on a recruiting trip. He was going to South Carolina to recruit a black athlete whose name was George Webster, who became one of the all-time great football players here at MSU. And he was recounting—and not with any criticism, it was just the way things were in the early sixties—a lot of the southern colleges and universities were still recruiting mostly white athletes as opposed to black athletes, and he said, "Until Bear Bryant and those other coaches start waking up to the real world, I'm going to continue to go." He also got a great quarterback named Jimmy Ray out of North Carolina. That's just the way it was.

Charnley: Innovative for sure.

This type of format doesn't lend itself to really extensive answers, and I'm sorry that we can't go for too much longer—

Kelly: I understand.

Charnley: In looking back at your experience at Michigan State, is there anything that maybe you see now as most important?

Kelly: I think what was most important to me was the way I became affiliated with the Honors College and then got to share in that experience and provide some leadership with it as associate director, and even more as director. It was, as I said earlier, an intellectually stimulating time to be here, and I thought this was one of the great universities of the United States. I still think it is. But it was so much on the cutting edge in that decade. I think others that you may talk to, or have talked to, would agree that that was for a lot of reasons. One, the economy was growing. The resources in the State of Michigan were available through state government, the legislature. And also, John Hannah was a very effective fundraiser in the private sector as well, so we were not constrained as much for financial and other types of development.

We used to observe, “The sun never sets on John Hannah’s empire.” You’d turn around and almost every week there’d be a new building going up somewhere on campus, and exciting developments, new schools, new programs. So it was just a very exciting time to be part of all of that.

Charnley: I want to thank you on behalf of the project, and I appreciate the time and your insight.

Kelly: Thank you so much.

One last point I'll make. I talked about my interaction with President Hannah. The toughest interview I had to have with him was when I went to him to tell him that I was leaving the university to take a private college presidency. He leaned forward and took off his glasses and said, "Now Bill, are you sure this is what you really want to do?" He was very open and receptive. He said, "I understand the challenge and opportunity," but he had some good observations to make which I shall always treasure.

Charnley: Thank you.

Kelly: Thank you.

[End of interview]



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