Dr. John DiBiaggio

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Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is Wednesday, July 12th, the year 2000. We're at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. I'm Jeff Charnley, along with Fred Honhart, interviewing Dr. John DiBiaggio for the MSU [Michigan State University] Oral History Project for the sesquicentennial of the institution, to be commemorated in the year 2005.

As you can see, we're tape-recording this oral history today, Dr. DiBiaggio. Do you give us permission to record this interview?

DiBiaggio: Absolutely.

Charnley: I'd like to start first with a little bit about your educational and professional background prior to coming to Michigan State.

DiBiaggio: I grew up in the city of Detroit, went to elementary and secondary school in the public school system in that city. I graduated from Dembey [phonetic] High School in Detroit, which is on the East Side, then spent my first two years in college at Wayne [State] University, working while I was in school. My parents are both immigrants and were factory workers in the city. So despite the fact that I have an older sister, I was the first to attend college in the family.

After spending two years there, I decided to transfer, because I wanted to have an experience away from home, and ended up going to Eastern Michigan, in part because, when I talked with the people there, they offered me an opportunity to work while I was there, which I had to do in order to pay for my education.

I graduated from there, wondering what I might do with my life, having majors in chemistry and English. The University of Michigan offered me a fellowship to work on a Ph.D. in English, but my father felt that that was

not a particularly impressive calling, to be a college professor. "How can you make a living as a college professor?" So he said, "You really need a profession."

I took an examination, and they suggested I would be suited for law. Well, my father didn't feel that law was a terribly appropriate profession either. I got it at the home of a dear friend of mine whose family was a bit more affluent. He had a sister that was a Ph.D., a brother that was a physician, a brother that was a dentist, and we discussed what I might do with my career, and they convinced me that evening that I should go to dental school, predicated on the fact that the physician was working very hard. That was before partnerships, before there were groups, and he was an obstetrician. He said, "Gee, it's taking an enormous amount of money. My brother, who's a dentist, is doing as well as I am financially and has a lot more time to explore other interests, and you have many interests." So I ended up going to dental school at the University of Detroit.

I went the next day, virtually, with my application to the dental school. I hadn't really taken an examination or anything, and I was admitted because I had been a good student, and I spent four years in dental school always wondering what in the world I was doing there. It really wasn't, you know, suited to me, but I'm a compulsive person, so I did well academically, graduated.

I went into practice, initially in Detroit for a brief period of time, and then into Baltimore, Michigan, where I had a very, very successful practice, was president of the school board. The town discussed my running for mayor. I served on a number of other boards, and I wondered why in the world I was doing all that, and at the same time I was teaching a couple of days down at the University of Detroit. I'd drive down to their dental school to teach.

I finally decided after a few years of that, that perhaps this wasn't the ideal thing for me to be doing. So I determined that I would return to school and went to the University of Michigan and earned a graduate degree in the Center for Higher Education there, a degree which is fundamentally for university administrators. My thought then was that I would be a dean, something that I wouldn't have dreamed of as a young person, but I thought, gee, that would be quite an accomplishment, to become a dean of the dental school.

Immediately after I was finished my degree at Michigan, I was offered an assistant deanship at the University of Kentucky, spent three years there, and then I was offered five dental deanships. There are only

fifty-odd dental schools in the country, and I chose to go to the Medical College of Virginia. They had some serious problems which I helped to address, and after six years there--this was now 1976--I was approached by three different medical centers, considered assuming the responsibility of oversight for those medical centers as a Vice President for Health Affairs for the universities that approached me.

It was surprising for a dentist, but not altogether so, because I had had a lot of administrative experience and they were looking for that. So I went to the University of Connecticut in 1976 to become Vice President for Health Affairs and Executive Director for the medical center. There were some very serious problems there. In fact, of the three that I was interviewed by, and I could have had any of them, this had the most difficulty, and that's why I accepted it. It also had the lowest salary, but I felt that if I could straighten this out, then I would have a career before me in this area of management of medical centers, not thinking beyond that at all.

We'd straightened out the problems in three years, and at the same time, concurrently, the president of the university decided to resign, and now the faculty approached me and said, "Would you be a candidate for the presidency of the university?" I was now in my mid-forties and had never thought of being a university president. But lo and behold, the process went forward, I was their unanimous choice and assumed the presidency of the University of Connecticut, something that I had never really contemplated.

Charnley: What year was that?

DiBiaggio: That was in 1979. During my tenure there, especially during the last couple of years, several universities approached me, suggesting that I might want to consider moving to a more complex and larger institution. I wasn't particularly interested, because I was very happy at Connecticut. They treated me very well. I had gone through one search in Florida which was kind of peculiar, and I thought well, perhaps I shouldn't even be thinking about this, but then I was contacted by Michigan State, and I was intrigued, not only because I had some admiration for what John [A.] Hannah had done at Michigan State, and with the land-grant concept in general, but additionally it was an opportunity to return home. I have an elderly mother still in Michigan, now ninety-one, in

assisted living, and my sister and her family were there. So it was a chance to come home and to lead a really truly major university and perhaps to spend a career there, which was sort of my objective.

This would have been, as you know, now 1985. So I was fifty-two years of age, about to turn fifty-three, when I went there and could have contemplated staying there through retirement. I came to know John very, very well. I'd known him from afar, and we became rather close, as a matter of fact, to a point where when John passed away, I was asked by the family to eulogize him, and that was very high praise indeed.

But that's how I got to where I am, and it's a peculiar route, I know, not the traditional route for an academic, but one which has been comfortable for me. Then when, of course, I left Michigan State again, I had several opportunities and opted to come here to Tufts.

Charnley: What was the relationship to Dr. Blanche Martin? I talked with him, and he talked a little bit about having you as a professor. What do you remember about him?

DiBiaggio: Well, it was very peculiar, because it didn't even occur to me that Blanche was on the Board of Trustees. I had known him as a student and knew him well enough, and he was a very good student, by the way. Blanche was not an athlete that wasn't academically competitive, because he was. He was a very bright young man. I went through a tragedy with him when he was a student. He lost his first wife, came home and found her dead. She had a heart problem, and she died while he was a student. I became close to him during that period.

But then when he decided he wanted to enter practice, he thought he would come back to East Lansing to practice, and he talked to me about it, but he was concerned how would they accept an African-American practicing in what was virtually a majority community. I said, "Gee, Blanche, I haven't a clue, but why don't we go up, you and I, and visit some people, particularly Duffy Daugherty," and just get a sense and look for some space, do some things and talk to some people, and see if there's even a possibility.

So we went up to see Duffy. I hadn't met Duffy before. It was a delightful meeting, as you might guess. I told Duffy what Blanche was contemplating, and we chatted about it, and he turned to Blanche and said, "Now,

Blanche, you go over there and you open up an office on [unclear], and you'll have every bit of trauma that comes through this football team and this athletic department. That'll keep you busy all by itself." And that's how Blanche Martin decided to settle there.

Interestingly, then when I went back to encounter him, it was a surprise to me. I hadn't realized what had happened to him and his career. It had been many years since I had seen him, but it was kind of a delight to find that he was on the Board of Trustees and he had prospered in the Lansing area.

Charnley: Did he make any contacts with you when you were at Connecticut?

DiBiaggio: Yes. I think in the process, when they were going through the search, he wasn't on the board any longer, I think, by that time, but he called me a few times to urge me to consider it. Apparently he had some conflicts with some of the people there, and he was hoping that I would help to resolve those. At least that's the sense that I got. It wasn't anything like that, being critical or anything, but I got the sense that he was disturbed about some things that had happened, and he was just anxious about the possibility that I might come. Then afterwards, when I arrived there, we spent some time together, and he told me about some of his concerns.

Charnley: What do you remember about the search process, coming back?

DiBiaggio: It was interesting, because I was invited to be interviewed in Cleveland. They broke the board up into two groups, four and four, so that they wouldn't violate the Freedom of Information Act and still could maintain privacy, because I told them that there was no way, as a sitting president, that I could allow myself to be publicly exposed in the process, because it would be very difficult to come back then if I weren't their choice or if I weren't interested.

But I went to Cleveland, was interviewed, and they thereafter called and said, "Gee, we really want to have you come. We'd like to talk to you again," and four trustees flew in here to Boston and met with me and discussed the possibility of my coming at that time, and thereafter we made the decision to do so.

Charnley: You mentioned that when you went to Connecticut or your were at Kentucky there were some problems at those universities. What did you see when you first came to Michigan State? What do you remember as some of the most difficult problems you faced?

DiBiaggio: Well, some of the problems still exist, of course, and the greatest problem Michigan State faces is that it doesn't receive the kind of support financially from the state that it merits. It always seems to be overwhelmed by the University of Michigan, and in part by Wayne, because of the representation that they had in the legislature, at least at that time. You'll recall it was a Democratic legislature, a Democratic governor, and had entree through some very powerful people then in the legislature who had considerable control over higher education funding. So I recognized immediately that the university was doing many good things, but doing them without adequate resources, and they didn't have any endowment to speak of either.

When I first arrived, the only vehicle for enhancing our financial circumstance was to increase tuition, and our tuition was modest at best, compared to what someone pays at a private institution such as this one. So we recommended, the board recommended, an increment in tuition.

Well, Governor Blanchard had spoken out publicly against any increases in tuition, and had made a big issue of it publicly. So I had neither money coming from the state at adequate levels, no endowment to speak of, and no potential for generating it through student tuition.

I went to visit with the governor, and I said, "Governor Blanchard, is it possible for me to increase fees?" You know, that's kind of specious, but he said, "Yeah, that's okay. I just don't want you to increase tuition." So we increased the fees substantially, and the next thing I knew I was called on the carpet by Speaker of the House and the

legislature and a member of the legislature from the Detroit area and read the riot act to for about an hour. I said, "You're both Democrats, and I went to the governor."

"He has nothing to do with this. This is our decision."

It was an amazing experience for me, disappointing because of the behavior and the language that was used. I was really taken aback. But we were warned that if we did this again, they would reduce further the support from the state. But it was a struggle constantly while I was there to try, to achieve equity.

One of the things that disturbed me about Michigan State was the paranoia that existed, the feeling that somehow or another they were always inferior to the University of Michigan. I would say publicly, constantly, the University of Michigan is a great graduate elitist institution, in the best sense of the word. We are a great land-grant university, and that's what we should be, the best of all the land grants. And the State of Michigan is indeed fortunate to have a great elitist institution and a great land-grant institution.

You know, I've used lots of examples, like the fact that before Michigan State was created, a student couldn't get admitted into the University of Michigan unless they had attended a private high school, and we opened up education to everyone. I pointed out how much we contributed to the economy, and used those kinds of approaches to make people feel better about who they were and the contributions that they were making, which I fundamentally, firmly believe they were.

I think it impacted somewhat, but, unfortunately, the dichotomy was so great, to do something about it was very difficult because incremental increases were never adequate. In fact, that dichotomy became greater, because if you got a percentage increase, an institution or anyone with more resources to begin with, the increment becomes larger through dollars, and that's what we were facing continuously, and it was very frustrating.

The other thing was that we didn't seem able to influence the process in terms of trustees and the selection of trustees. John Hannah told me on several occasions that the biggest mistake he had made was as part of the constitutional convention agreeing to the election of trustees as a tradeoff for institutions getting greater autonomy, that is, University of Michigan, Michigan State, and Wayne.

The reality is that the autonomy didn't truly exist, because, as I said, the concept was that you would manage your own affairs, but if you did something that the legislature or the governor disagreed with, they'd penalize you the following year by decreasing your budget or by not providing funds for a facility you wanted to build or whatever. There was always that threat. So you really weren't autonomous and yet you were still straddled with the idea of trustees being elected in statewide election in political parties.

We often tried to influence the nominations, but were not always effective at that. I recall one instance where a young woman was the nominee and came to visit with us because we invited all the nominees of both parties out to the campus to try to orient them to what was happening at the university, and I said "What brought you to this? Why did you decide that you wanted to run?"

"Well, I was just called the night before the convention and asked if I would be a candidate." She says, "I went to the University of Michigan. I don't know anything about Michigan State. I don't really know how I got here."

I was really taken aback, because here I have a governor who is a Michigan State graduate, and I have a candidate who has no awareness of the university, I thought a perfectly bright person who might have made a good trustee, but not exactly the kind of person you would assume would--she lost in the election, but the reality is that I wasn't interested in which party a trustee came from; I was interested in people who had some knowledge of higher education and were committed to the purposes of Michigan State.

Unfortunately, that happened far too often. The nominations were seen as patronage. The candidates were often selected for reasons other than their interest in serving in these roles. In fact, some of them had to go through a litmus test which had nothing to do with higher education, such as their stand on pro-choice, pro-life issue. Extraordinary. But we were never able to quite influence it despite the fact that all during my time there and thereafter, interestingly, for the first time in history, there was a governor who was a Michigan State graduate.

To Governor Engler's credit, under the system if there was an open position because somebody resigns or there's a death, on an interim basis an appointment can be made by the governor, and Governor Engler called me just to ask me about appointees, and that's how Russ [Russell G.] Mawby, for instance, got on the board. He didn't want

to run. He didn't want to be in a political contest. So after the six years that he served, he decided he would step off.

But I found the state to be much more politicized than what I had left. When I left Michigan back there in 1967, the legislature was, in great part, from rural background. It was, in great part, conservative but, even more, dedicated to education. Education was a very, very high priority with them. The board of Michigan State was virtually the Board of Agriculture and was very supportive of everything that Michigan State was doing because of that. But when I came back, the shift had changed and things had altered dramatically in terms of the backgrounds of the members of the legislature and their view of issues that were of consequence, at least to those of us at Michigan State.

Honhart: So you saw a marked contrast between Governor Engler and Governor Blanchard in terms of their approach to the university, or wasn't that a complete change?

DiBiaggio: Well, it was somewhat different. I think Jamie [phonetic] depended upon some people that were close to him and, in my view, on occasion gave him bad counsel. I think John Engler was more his own person, made his own decisions.

Charnley: How would you characterize your relationship with them and also their support of the university?

DiBiaggio: Well, my relationship with them was very good. I mean, very friendly, very open. You know, we had a bit of a difference, Governor Blanchard and I, over athletics and the role of athletics, but I've seen him since and it's always been very pleasant. John Engler was at our house many times. Both of them were. I just saw Michelle a while back at something I was at Michigan, and we chatted warmly. I had no problems with them or with most people in the legislature, with a few exceptions, few exceptions, but the vast majority were supportive. I think in some instances there was a bit more intrusion, maybe because Michigan State has the misfortune of being in the state

capitol, and along with everything else that's read daily down there, they read the *State News*, and sometimes it isn't always very kind to public officials.

Charnley: Or accurate.

DiBiaggio: Or accurate. But they read it like it's absolute fact, and we all know better than that.

Charnley: The Michigan paper might not be distributed there, only the *State News.*

DiBiaggio: And if it is distributed a while after it's come out and someone's had a chance to explain. With ours, it was there the same day.

Charnley: Would you talk a little bit about the capital campaign? Usually you did something important about the funding equity through [unclear].

DiBiaggio: They hadn't had a capital campaign, and when I arrived there, I said, "We just have to generate some private support. We just obviously are not going to get the kinds of money we need from the state very quickly." Michigan State had never had a substantial capital campaign. So we put one together, and we began by hitting some major sources to set the tone, and we started with Chrysler, because we knew if we got a gift from Chrysler, then the gift from Ford would be a bit larger and the gift from General Motors would have to be larger than that. And we were successful.

We used a different strategy than normally is used. I would go to visit--and I came to know [Lee] Iaccoca at the time and Don Peterson very well, the head of General Motors at the time, Roger Smith. I visited each of them, and I began by pointing out how many of our graduates they employ, which are substantial in number, and then

asked them "How are we doing? What's your perception?" and listened to their views, what they thought of our graduates and what we might be doing differently.

For instance, Iaccoca said, "Well, you're sending us wonderful engineers, but they can't write reports, and if they can't articulate their knowledge, they're of little value to us." So I went back to engineering, and I said, "This is what Lee Iaccoca tells me," and they instituted in 20 to 25 percent of their class is a writing component, which I thought was a good response. I explained that to Lee, and he was pleased to hear that. He was really interested in K through 12 education, and we talked about that at great length.

So then I said, "Well, let us come up with some ideas and talk to your vice president for corporate giving and have our people talk to that person." By the time we then gave him a proposal, it was a fait accompli, and they gave us whatever it was in those days, 2 million. So Ford gave us 3 million, General Motors gave us 5 million.

Then we were starting to get some substantial gifts, and people began to notice us. Then we were able to, after long negotiation, get the [Eli] Broad Gift, which was substantial, Eli Broad's gift, and that set a new standard. Suddenly, people began to recognize that maybe we were an institution worth investing in, and that's how it all came about. They said, "Well, maybe we can raise 100 million," and I said, "Well, what about 160 million?" We ended up raising 250 million.

The most important thing about it, I kept saying, was not the amount we raised, but establishing a pattern of giving, and once we had done that and gotten the people in place that had the capability, the structure, then we could continue to raise money forever. We had to succeed at the first campaign. In fact, we had to do very well at it. More importantly, we had to develop the organizational structure that led to fund-raising in the future. That was my real interest, and it succeeded.

Charnley: And how did you feel about that [unclear]?

DiBiaggio: Well, I thought it was remarkable, considering we're a public university and had never done this before.

You know, it's an interesting thing. When I was at Connecticut, we had their first capital campaign, and we had the same kind of problems getting the legislature to support us because there were all these great private--Yale is in Connecticut--all these great private institutions. They said, "Why do we need to put all this money into the University of Connecticut?" When I got the corporate community to start to contribute, that piqued the interest of the legislature, and they began to look at us differently. It was a strange thing. I mean, we were the same institution, but they said, "Gee, if the corporate community, which is so important to this state, is interested in the university, we should be as well," and it changed their whole attitude. I think it worked at Michigan State, too.

Parenthetically, during the same time we were working very hard on the image of the university, and I was out everywhere. I think I spoke to every group in the state, every service club, every alumni group, and God knows. Someone once asked me how small a group I would speak to, and I said, "Two, and I can be one of them."

It's interesting, because I have talked to former regents at the University of Michigan since, and they told me that was really beginning to upset them, that Michigan State was gaining so much recognition, and they were really concerned about that, and they kept saying to their people, "Look what they're doing over at Michigan State." You know, all I was doing was taking what we had. I mean, we had all these cooperative extension offices and all these opportunities to give to communities, and I was just using it to its nth degree.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Charnley: Let's talk a little bit about some of the curricular changes that were instituted and also some of the administration of the university. It was certainly a time of transition in terms of the curriculum. Obviously the semester transition, or the transition from terms to semester, occurred under your administration. Would you talk a little bit about some of those, acronym programs? Do you remember any of those?

DiBiaggio: Sure. Well, when I got there, I thought, gee, the quarter system has certain advantages. Students take fewer courses, can concentrate on those courses and maintain, at least to a degree, the information that they had

received during the course more fully and perhaps, when they took examination, therefore, be able to do a bit better. It seemed like a model that would be interesting and have certain advantages. However, when I got there and I began to talk to students, I discovered that what had happened was, while the model was initially to take fewer courses three, three, and four, now because of the way the curriculum had become structured, students were taking four, and having to take four every quarter in order to finish a normal course. I thought, "Wow. This mitigates against what the purpose was. In fact, our students are being disadvantaged because they're being asked to do more than students at other institutions, and therefore perhaps their grade points won't be competitive if they want to go on to graduate and professional study or even to get employment." And this was very disturbing to me.

Secondly, because we were on the quarter system, our schedule didn't correlate with anybody else's schedule. So there was no potential for us to have any cross-fertilization, and I saw some opportunities for that, although I don't know if they ever came about. I said, "Gee, why should we all have everything?" I mean, we have the premier African Studies Center in the country, and Michigan had the premier Asian Studies Center in the country. I said, why don't we just allow students to take courses at either place in those disciplines? It was interesting to me that, while I said that publicly a number of times, Jim Duderstadt at Michigan, sometime thereafter, said, "We have to develop an African Studies Center here because Michigan State has one," you know? It was bizarre, because it was an opportunity for us to share and to use our resources more wisely.

Well, when I discussed this with a few people, Lee Winder, who had been provost there, and some others, he said, "Well the faculty has considered this several times, and they've always rejected the idea."

So I said, "Well is it possible for us to float it again?"

"Oh, yeah. We can float it again."

So we went to--what's it called? The Academic Council, or the Administrative and Academic Council, which is made up of students, faculty, and administrators, and I presented it to them. There was a lot of discussion and dialogue, and they had two possibilities: they could pass it, or they could refer it to the faculty senate, the whole faculty, for consideration. Now, they couldn't vote it up or down; they could just refer it back for clarification or for

addition or whatever. So that's what they did. They went down to the faculty senate, and they made a bunch of suggestions.

There was a lot of debate over it, and now it came back, and now the council voted again, and now it went back to the senate again. It was a huge meeting. I'll never forget, the auditorium was packed with people, almost 800 people, and that's a significant number.

Charnley: I was there.

DiBiaggio: Remember? And there was a lot of discussion, dialogue, debate. Then I remember Walter Adams stood up and said, "Enough. We've talked about this enough. Now call the question." The question was called.

Somebody stood up and said, "I move that we do this by secret ballot."

So they said, "Okay. We'll do it by secret ballot."

Now, you've got to imagine the piles of paper that were up on this table, and I'm sitting there thinking, "Dear God, don't let there be a tie, because I will have to--" and the thing--this is a true story--the thing passed 400 to 399.

Charnley: That's right.

DiBiaggio: A real mandate, right? Four hundred to 399. Nobody contested it. It was all over, and we were on the semester system. I might add parenthetically, that's one of my three extraordinary accomplishments in Michigan State. I mean, you have to build a monument to me some day, and you have to etch these three things. The other two are this. When I first got there, I was going to my first meeting of the council and walking across campus with Lee Winder, and I said, "What are we discussing, Lee, today?"

"A dismissal for cause document, under what circumstances you can dismiss and tenured faculty member."

"Oh," I said, "that's an interesting subject."

So we get over there, and, oh, there are amendments offered and discussion and amendments. Finally there's a pause. I mean, I did what I thought was the thing to do and I would have expected to do. I said, "Well, gee, apparently, since there are no other amendments being offered, we return to the original motion and we vote." And we voted, and it barely passed, but it barely passed. And there was this darned silence. And I turned to the secretary, who had been there for the millennium and I said, "Well, what's the matter?"

"We voted."

I said, "Yes?"

"And we passed it."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Well, we've been discussing it for some time."

I said, "Oh? How long?"

"Seventeen years." Seventeen years!

I said, "Oh, my God." Little did I know.

Then they had a document which was a grievance document, that had been an interim grievance document for ten years, and I got it finally made a permanent document.

So those are three really remarkable accomplishments, right?

Charnley: Absolutely. Within that continuum, it is.

DiBiaggio: Isn't that an amazing story? That's a true story. At any rate, there were a lot of criticism, but I'm of the opinion that--you didn't really ask me--my administrative style is to delegate responsibility and authority and to hold people accountable, and that's the way I manage. The curriculum belongs to the faculty; it doesn't belong to your administration. I felt I could have input. I could discuss, give my view, but in the final analysis that decision had to be made by the faculty and not by the administration. And that's the way it really happened in most instances, I think.

Now, sometimes people felt that David Scott pressed a little too hard on his interests and issues, but fundamentally the fact that we did have control over the curriculum, and I had a number of administrative officers to whom I delegated responsibility and authority and then held them accountable and trusted their judgment.

Charnley: Would you talk a little bit about the people who were working closely with you in the administration? Dave Scott you mentioned.

DiBiaggio: Lee retired a year or two after I got there, and then the search committee identified David as a candidate and recommended him to me.

Roger Wilkinson was acting vice president for finance administration, so I made him permanent vice president. It was one of the first times that the trustees intruded because they wanted me to appoint somebody from the state that they had as a candidate. I said I didn't see any reason for doing that if there was somebody competent from inside who had worked for the university for some years.

The vice president of student affairs was already in place, and I saw no reason to change that. We had a vice president of public relations at the time. She left shortly thereafter, moved to Atlanta, and Terry acted in the role for a period of time and then we made him permanent.

I changed the legal structure. There was an attorney who was the sole university attorney, and he was actually in practice.

Charnley: Lee Carr.

DiBiaggio: Lee Carr. Strange man, really a very decent man, but peculiar in his behavior. But he was ill, too. He boasted that they'd never lost a case, and that's probably the case, but the university wasn't as complex as it now had become, and I felt that we needed more representation than that. So we created a vice presidency for legal affairs and a staff, which I thought was necessary, with expertise in the various areas of the university. Because

there were so many things now, there were so many litigious actions that we were encountering that we thought we had to have something different from that.

They had a secretary of the Board of Trustees, and that person retired, too.

Charnley: Jack Breslin? No, that was Ballard, isn't it?

DiBiaggio: Yes. It was before that. Not Jack. Jack was in governmental affairs.

Charnley: Was it Kissinger who was--

DiBiaggio: I don't remember the guy's name. But we made the person that was my executive also the secretary of the board and with a staff, and that worked out, I think, much better than having the two offices separate, for efficiency as well as for control, I think.

And then Jack was there, of course, and I went through his tragedy with him and his family and eulogized him as well. But he was doing governmental affairs and doing that really quite well. He really had a good relationship with many people down in the legislature, and that was helpful to us.

They were generous to us in terms of capital projects, you know, one-time things. For God's sake, they built that veterinary clinical building while I was there, and we built the Breslin [Student Events] Center and a lot of other things that we built while I was there, and that was all grand, but what they didn't give us was money to sustain ourselves, operating monies, the monies for salaries and things that I thought were more critical than the buildings. They were always prepared to give you money for buildings for some reason or other.

Charnley: That still continues to this day.

DiBiaggio: Yes.

Honhart: And working with David Scott, how would you characterize working with him as provost?

DiBiaggio: David is a very bright guy, and he had lots of wonderful ideas. He developed a large cadre of staff people that he would consult with. So he'd have a large deans council, huge group to attend. I don't know how you can say grace over that many. My view was always there was only so many could report to me and that I could really keep track of, but that was his style, he wanted a lot of participation.

He was also very committed to diversity, very committed to the land-grant concept, I mean, just absolutely dedicated to the institution really following through on its mission, and could be forceful in that regard. Sometimes people got angry with him because of that, but he is an excellent person with all the right motives and attitudes. I sometimes had to work with him on style more than on where his heart was. His heart was in the right place, but he alienated some folks in the process. I helped him when he wanted to come here to U. Mass. I would have helped him anywhere, because I did respect him, and he's done a very good job here.

Charnley: Your continuing relationship with the board, will you talk a little bit about that, some of the members that you've worked with and the dynamics of the board?

DiBiaggio: There were board members that I had extraordinarily close relationships with. Dee [Dolores M.] Cook and I had gone to high school together. She went to Detroit [unclear] as well. We graduated in the same class--Dolores Myers in those days. I was delighted to rekindle that relationship. Pat [Patrick J.] Wilson was on the board then. He was a wonderful man, played football at Michigan State, was a lawyer from Travers City, a very decent, good man that I was very close to. Dean Pridgeon was just a wonderful person, very quiet, very unassuming, a hog farmer, but really attuned to what Michigan State was really all about. Barbara [J.] Sawyer [-Koch] was a member of the board when I came there. She was very supportive and very helpful. The chairman at

the time was an African-American, a wonderful man. His father was an Episcopal priest in Detroit. Can you help me conjure up some names?

Charnley: I'm trying to think of that, too. We can fill that in.

DiBiaggio: Fill that in, because he's just a wonderful person. They were all good people. I mean, they were good people. I had a conflict with a couple because I didn't think their attitudes were appropriate, that they were very intrusive, they were more interested in intercollegiate athletics and where their seats were than what was happening with the university. Two of them are still there, I think, and that was a problem. When I got there, they weren't on the board, either one of them. In fact, there was quite a bit of change when I got there. I had the endorsement of the entire board. That's one of the problems there. The board members change. The board is so small, you know, it's only eight people. A slight change has a dramatic impact.

At Michigan, I'm told that when they had four Republicans and four Democrats, they were always in conflict with one another, always trying to outdo one another, and the president's caught in between the two groups in trying to keep them all happy. But I didn't think it was political at Michigan State; it was individual. On either party there were good people, and there were some with whom I took exception.

Charnley: President [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.] constantly experienced a five-three split. Do you have a similar experience?

DiBiaggio: Yes. In fact, he only got appointed, I understand, because Blanche voted with the Republicans to appoint him.

Charnley: That's correct.

DiBiaggio: So he came in with a split vote. I didn't come in with that. I came in with a unanimous vote, but it didn't make much difference when the board changed its character.

Charnley: The role of intercollegiate athletics at a land-grant institution obviously was a keen one that developed during your administration. Would you talk a little bit about circumstances there in relationship with Coach [George] Perles?

DiBiaggio: John Hannah used athletics to bring Michigan State into prominence. He recognized that he had to do something to get people to appreciate that Michigan State was equivalent to any Big Ten institution, and the vehicle for doing that was to get Michigan State into the Big Ten. They were playing teams equivalent to Big Ten teams prior to that time, but he had to find a way to convince the Big Ten that they ought to accept them as a member, at the same time to get the legislature to approve changing their status from Michigan State College to Michigan State University.

From his perspective, athletics was one way of doing that. So what he did was--and this is a true story because they became so familiar with all this--he went to the president of Notre Dame, and he said, "If you will play us, sign a long-term contract to play us annually, we will take less of the gate, 25 percent rather than 50, and that will give us the credibility so that the Big Ten will not be able to deny us admission."

Father Cavanaugh, if I'm correct at the time, said, "John, we will play you, but we'll split the gate just like we always do." And indeed, getting that embarrassed the Big Ten, because here they were playing one of the major schools in the country every year, at least from what I'm told, to accept Michigan State. At the same time, of course, he was working through the legislature. Remember, now, it's rural and he's got a lot of friends, and despite the fact that Harlan Hatcher worked vigorously to try to get--and by the way, the vote was very close, like five-four or whatever it was, five-three, five-four, and Michigan voted against Michigan State coming into the Big Ten, and then Harlan Hatcher worked very hard to keep them from becoming a university. He traveled all around the state, and

when the vote came down, there was one senator that voted against Michigan State becoming a university. I don't know if you know this history, but this is a reality.

Charnley: That was the second vote. The first time they actually were able to defeat it, and then they came back again the following year.

DiBiaggio: Is that right?

Charnley: Yes, and they got it.

DiBiaggio: That's what I mean. I'm just [unclear] what I'm told.

Charnley: And it's also correct about Notre Dame.

DiBiaggio: I must tell you, when Father [Theodore] Hesburg was retiring, along with Ned Joyce, Ned Joyce came over for a game, and we gave him a blanket, a Michigan State blanket. I talked about this, how wonderful Notre Dame had been to us, and he said, "Yeah, you guys are really grateful. For the next sixteen years, you beat us fifteen times or something." Those were the great Michigan State years, right? Right up to '66 we were--well, at any rate, unfortunately, there were a lot of corners cut, too, and I'm not sure that John was even totally familiar or privy to them, although I think in a way he just sort of ignored them, and some stuff was going on. It continued to go on until during Cliff Wharton's time there was an NCAA investigation, which was a bit embarrassing for the university, and there was a lot of shenanigans, Cliff says, that were going on. By the time I arrived there, that was all set aside.

As a member of the Knight Commission, as a person who has an interest in collegiate athletics, you should understand that I am a supporter of intercollegiate athletics. I think it's good for the kids who participate because

they have a special skill, it's good for those of us who are fans because we enjoy watching it, whether we be on the campus or off, and it's good for campus spirit, morale. It isn't intercollegiate athletics that's bad; it's what's happened with it. It's gotten out of hand. I mean, we admitted some students that I was aware of at Michigan State were very marginal, and even more importantly, we didn't do anything to add value to them.

I knew story after story of students who were there who didn't really take genuine courses, who didn't earn genuine degrees, who were exploited, in essence, as athletes, and that was disturbing to me. I kept asking about this, "Why does this have to be?" I mean, we want to maintain, and, sure, there should be some give, just as we have some give for students who are gifted in other ways, who are musicians or artists. Maybe they can't do math very well, but at least we owed it to these kids to make sure when they left us they had some skill.

I used to go out and see the teams every year and say, "I hope you have a wonderful year. I hope you have a post-season experience. Good for you. Good for us. But, for goodness sake, remember why you're really here, because so few of you are going to make it to the pros and so few are going to be there beyond three years, and even if you do make it, if you're not educated, some agent's going to dupe you out of all your money."

I'd also talk about their behavior, how they were role models and how important it was for them to remember that they were privileged to be athletes in the Big Ten, to have that capability, and to be receiving a grant-in-aid, and that the quid pro quo was that they had to behave, on and off the field, in a fashion that brought credit to the university. I said, "It's no different than me. You won't find me in a bar in East Lansing. You won't find me doing things that bring discredit or embarrass this institution in any way, because it isn't me, it's the office that's important. And it isn't you; it's what you represent. And you represent this university and its athletic teams." And I would go through this litany with them every year.

But I could see these third-stringers looking at me and saying, "What's he know?" Then I would talk to the athletes, because I'd go in the locker rooms afterwards, and I'd talk to the athletes. Some of them would say to me at the end of the season, "You know, I never wanted to be there, but how else was I going to make it to the pros?" There was no other vehicle, you know. There was no other alternative because there were no farm clubs for football or for basketball. That was it.

I was close to sports, traveled with the teams, went into the locker rooms. Stan [Stanley] Drobak, who was the tennis coach, a dear friend, and I used to go over and have bagels every Friday morning with George the day before the game. We went to the Rose Bowl, and it was quite wonderful. Now I'm in Thailand, I think.

Charnley: That's correct.

DiBiaggio: And I get this call that's a very critical big issue, "George is thinking about going to the Green Bay Packers. You've got to talk to him."

So I get on the phone with him, and I said, "George, I don't want you to do this. We love you at Michigan State and things are great and we're good friends, but you've got to make the decision that's in the best interest of your family." I'll say this to anybody here. If people get an opportunity for a better job, I say to them, "Please. It's a tribute to us that other people want you. Otherwise we wouldn't have anybody, right?" So I said, "You have to make a decision on your own. Just know that I would love for you to stay." And I said, "And I understand that we'll try to negotiate some things that would be helpful to you." I said, "Well, we'll give you a long-term contract to give you security."

But in my absence, without consulting with me, the board also agreed to give him an annuity if he stayed so many years and some other things that I hadn't even discussed. So I came back and was told all this. So I said, "Okay. I'm sorry you didn't think to tell me, at least discuss it with me, because why should some people be getting things that others are not getting? I've got professors here I want to keep, too." But I swallowed it. I thought, well, that's it, you know. He's made his decision. He's going to be here now for his career.

Well, lo and behold, two or three years pass. Doug Weaver comes in to see me one day and says, "I want to step aside as athletic director."

I said, "Gee, Doug. I wish you wouldn't do that. You're still young and we've got a lot of things to do."

"Well, I want to step aside."

This was like November, and I said, "Well, if you insist upon it, but please wait until after the season to announce it, because then we could get to discussing what we might do."

He said, "All right. I won't discuss it with anybody else."

That week is the football banquet. I'm sitting next to George, and he says, "Well, Doug's leaving, and I want to be athletic director as well, just like Beau is over at Michigan."

I was stunned. I said, "Please come in and talk to me about this. This is not the place to talk about it."

So he came in to see me, and I said, "Well, George, to begin with, I have some problem with a person serving in both roles, because there's no checks and balances." I said, "Now, if you want to be athletic director and step out of the coaching, I mean, that's legitimate. I think that you could be a candidate and you'd probably be the prime candidate. But you can't do both." That was that discussion.

Then we get to the Aloha Bowl or whatever in Hawaii. Doug says, "Well, we've got a real crisis. The Jets are talking to George."

I said, "Well, I thought we set this aside already."

"Well, you have to meet with him."

So I meet with him. He says, "Are you going to make me athletic director and coach?"

I said, "I told you, George. Number one, I don't think this is a good idea. Number two, we have affirmative action rules. We're supposed to go through a search, a legitimate search. We can go through a search, and if you want to be athletic director, I think you'd probably be the candidate, but you can't be both."

Some of the trustees meets with me, and he said, "Well, why not?"

I said, "Because, first of all, we have rules to follow, and, secondly, it's not appropriate, I don't think, because this is an area where real mischief can occur."

"Well, look what happened to Michigan."

I said, "What happened at Michigan happened after they had gone through a search and two of them were aborted, and they did this, and Robin Fleming did it in an interim year, when he was president for an interim year." I said, "You know, we don't do what Michigan does. We do what we think is right."

They said, "Well we don't want to lose this guy."

I wanted to say to them, "We're not talking about Bear Bryant here, you know."

So I let it go at that, thinking, well, I'd made my point. Now we come back and Larry [Lawrence D.] Owen talks to me about this, and I said, "Larry, I've told you how I feel, and according to your own bylaws, you cannot make an appointment without my recommendation. That's what the bylaws say. The only persons you can appoint are the president and the secretary without the approval of the president."

"I can't understand why you feel--"

I said, "Well, because I'm--"

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

DiBiaggio: ...of it is that they went ahead and did it anyhow, with the thought that it would be tested for a year. During that year, towards the end of the year, I said to George, "Now, George, if you want to be athletic director, you can be athletic director, but you can't be coach and athletic director both. At least I can't recommend that."

He said, "Well what about my annuity?"

I said, "Even though you haven't finished five years, I will assure the annuity."

"Well, what about my assistant coaches?"

"We will keep them employed until the end of the year if the new coach doesn't want them, protect their salaries until the end of the year." Assistant coaches come and go all the time. But I said, "We'll protect them because you're worried about them." I said, "I'll put all that in writing," and I did.

He still said that's not the way he wanted it. So that really caused finally the whole flap, and then we named another athletic director, and all those things went on.

Once they focused that discussion about the conflict between George Perles and I, the conflict was really with the Board of Trustees and it superseding the authority of the president. It happened, as I told you, two or three other times when they had their own candidates for other positions and other intrusions on other matters. All I was

trying to do was to make clear the difference between the role of the president and the role of trustees of the university. As you know, every editorial page in the state supported my position, and the only people who were critical were sports junkies, and not even all of them.

Charnley: As I remember from that time period, there was a back page of the *Sports Illustrated* that had a full page on the discussion and it was very supportive of your position.

DiBiaggio: Yes. But again, it's too bad, because they really didn't get at the heart of the issue. The trouble is, it caused a schism between me and some members of that board which could never be healed and which continued on to the point where in the final analysis, the board discussed giving me a contract, I said, "I don't need a contract. I'm not interested in a contract." They put one person in charge of the discussion. At the end, he said, "Well we'll give you a one-year contract."

I said, "I've got a one-year contract." I said, "You know, in any court of law, if you were to dismiss me, it would force you, compel you, to pay out a year, because that's fair practice. Why don't you simply do what we do in our review of all administrative officers, simply publicly state that my performance has been acceptable and that you want to reappoint me for a period of time, no contract, no nothing."

He said, "No, we can't do that."

And that's when I came home and said to my wife, "It's time for us to leave." And that's how we decided to leave, and that was the real reason for doing it, because I couldn't even say that much, and I thought I had done a fairly good job for Michigan State at that point. So that's what it all boiled down to in the final analysis, and it was unfortunate.

In fact, an interesting discussion occurred a couple of meetings before that about how someone would be made emeritus and would every president be emeritus. Bob [Robert E.] Weiss said, "Well, we don't necessarily have to make everybody emeritus, you know." It was clear what he was saying, and they didn't in my case. Amazing. Amazing how personal, how involved a few of those people were and how badly they behaved.

Honhart: Would you talk a little bit about involvement on the Knight Commission, how did you first get involved?

DiBiaggio: Father Hesburg called me and asked me if I'd be the Big Ten representative. Father Hesburg, by the way, was very supportive of me all this time. A wonderful man, understanding the moral and philosophical issues involved, was supportive. But he asked me to be a part of it. Some board members felt that was inappropriate for me to be involved in that, too, just like they were infuriated, a few of them, when we discussed bringing Penn State into the league, were opposed to it, demanded that I vote against it. Amazing.

But that's how I got involved with the Knight Commission, and I think I was a mover and shaker in it. I'll never forget, I was down in Florida talking to an alumni group, and they said, "Gee, though, if you do all these things, is it going to destroy all our competitiveness?"

I said, "Wait a second. If we were to do all these things that all the schools do, it would all be the same. Do you think there would be any less people at the Michigan State-Michigan game or the Michigan State-Notre Dame game if all the students on the field have B averages than there are today? The tradition's going to hold."

They said, "Yes, that makes sense."

But that's how I got involved and I was asked to join them.

Honhart: Have you had any continuing contact since you left Michigan State with people that were there?

DiBiaggio: Oh, yes. There's some people that I--I'll tell you, what you miss the most are your friends. You leave an institution and it continues on and it's doing well, but I had people like Stan Drobak and Brad Greenberg, who you may or may not know, remains a very close friend as of all these years. And John Collins, John and Mary Collins. John is an attorney in town who we see all the time, we're very close to. Charlie [Charles] Blackman, who was in education for years, he and I are Packard buffs and we talk Packards all the time. He's a wonderful man. There's

several people like that who are my good friends. I've got friends I grew up with in the city, in Michigan, too, not in the city any longer, but in Michigan.

So there are a lot of connections that I have, and people that I still correspond with. Still a lot of Michigan State folks who are here and there, some still there, some other places, call upon me for counsel, sometimes recommendations, and I'm always glad to provide them. Students, former students, I hear from former students quite a bit.

I thought we had wonderful students at Michigan State. I had a very good relationship with them, and I think there was a spirit of trust and confidence that they had in me, too. I was deeply moved at how supportive they were, almost universally during my tenure there in what we were doing, and the warmth with which I was always greeted at commencements and stuff. I'll tell you, the most moving experience of all, we'd have a party for the graduating seniors at Cowles House, and we'd break it into two evenings because there were so many students. Well, one night there were a whole bunch of kids in the house, and my wife said, "You've got to come out on the deck."

I said, "Ah, you know--"

"You've got to come out on the deck."

I came out on the deck and the marching band was out there. They'd only done this with Walter Adams, the only other person they'd given a band jacket to. They gave me a band jacket, and they stood there and sang the alma mater. You want to talk about gut-wrenching.

I love the place. I mean, I think it's beautiful. I think the people are one of the great faculty, staff that really cares a lot, works very hard with inadequate resources, in my view, has done a great job. Beautiful, beautiful campus, I mean, one of the prettiest in the country. My wife loved living in East Lansing because it's very good, everything is there, it's a pleasant community. The Midwest people are just plain friendly, and she's not a Midwesterner, and she just loved it. We would have stayed there. I would still be there today. I would be thinking about retiring now from Michigan State, rather than from this place, had it not been for that set of circumstances.

Honhart: If you look back on your legacy as president in the seven years that you were there, what are maybe a couple of things that stand out most?

DiBiaggio: Well, three or four, I think. Certainly the capital campaign and establishment of a structure for development. I think that was an important achievement and one that's going to serve the university very, very well.

A second was mollifying a rift that had occurred between the university and the alumni. You might recall that.

Charnley: Yes.

DiBiaggio: And I was able to, I think, breech that. In fact, the former alumni director came back, the former board, and were very thankful for all that I had done to assure that the alumni were in the fold. I think that was a substantial achievement as far as I was concerned and one that was going to be very important to the university in the long haul.

I think we placed a lot more attention on the needs of handicapped students while I was there, and they gave me some awards when I was leaving for having done so, working hard to make the campus more accessible and making people more sensitive to their needs.

I think we made some real advances in the area of diversity, both in enrollment and in creating a positive environment for minority students and women as well, something that I pride myself in.

We made some improvements in terms of capital projects that were important, the university needed.

I think we improved the relationships, at that time, with the legislature and with the government overall. I think they were healthy. Town and gown was not great when I got there, but when I was there we had great relationships with the mayor in East Lansing and the council and with Lansing as well, because I played an active

role with the Chamber and with a lot of other people. I worked on projects with them and brought the university in and brought them into the university. I think that was significant.

Some other things that we'd hoped would blossom didn't necessarily blossom the way we wished, like developing a research park out by the University Club. We did get the space set aside and the planning all done. I think it's beginning to evolve now.

Charnley: That's correct.

DiBiaggio: But I thought that in the long term that was to the advantage of the university. And above all, I think the thing I'm proudest of is that--and John Hannah used to say this to me. He said some wonderful things to me, things that will stay with me for a lifetime. I don't care, all the other stuff you could say, negative or whatever, the things that John said to me that meant so much to me were things like this, he said, "You're the first president since I left who really understand what this university's about, who really understands what a land-grant university should be."

One night at a foundation dinner I was talking about needing gifts for the university. John wasn't like this; this was not his nature. If you know the man, he's quiet. He got up and he walked over and put his hand on my shoulder, and he said, "This is the greatest gift to Michigan State University." And I was just stunned, you know. But it was the highest praise that I could imagine, because what I wanted to do was remind people what Michigan State was about. I wanted them to feel really, really proud, and I think maybe that's what I did when I was there. I think maybe people felt good. With all the problems, people felt good about being associated with Michigan State. The students felt proud to be there, proud to be associated with an institution that cared a lot, that reached out to people.

During my tenure there, in fact, during the hundredth year of the National Association of State Universities Land Grants, I was the chairman that year. I mean, they did a big volume, and we were right at the front of it, you know. They used to say that there was no stronger advocate for the land-grant movement in the United States than

me at that time. And that's maybe the thing I'm proudest of, because I really do believe that. Michigan State was the first land grant. It's the prototypical land grant. In my view, it is the best of the land grants because it does all the things that land grants--I mean, even the medical school is a land-grant medical school, for God's sake, putting students out there in all those communities. I felt so good about that, and I felt good about the people on the campus. It didn't seem to matter where I went, there were always warm receptions, place to place. It's just tragic that things worked out finally the way they did.

Charnley: One of the things that's recently happened at the school is the addition of a law school, which many people had long been involved with. When you were there, at your tenure, did that come up?

DiBiaggio: Yes. In fact, we tried to negotiate with Cooley [Law School]. We really made an effort to negotiate with Cooley to bring Cooley, because Cooley was located right there, had buildings. Their library could have become the state legal library. I thought we could take Cooley and create a really land-grant law school to graduate lawyers who were going to serve people, weren't going to be corporate types. Right? And I've seen Brennan since, at something else, and I tried, I really tried to negotiate a deal.

In fact, I had the support of members of the legislature and of the attorney general. If he would have been willing to have done that, that would have happened like that and we wouldn't have had to build buildings or anything. What he didn't like was he wanted to stay in charge of everything and maintain their own board, and I said, "That can't be." But if Judge Brennan would have agreed, then we would have probably downsized it and been more selective, because they select a lot of students and have a high attrition, and had it right there in the state capital, which would have been to our advantage, and it was the perfect thing. But it didn't work.

So then we began to have these conversations with the Detroit College of Law, which is a reputable law school, but they were just being instituted at the time, and I said, gee, we've got so many other needs right now. Until we address those other needs, how can we assume another responsibility? Why should we be in the business of bailing out a law school that's in fiscal difficulty when there are lots of law schools in this state?

Sometimes I'm approached here about, well, why don't we try and incorporate one of the minor law schools in this community? I say, "What will it take to make it the same quality as Harvard's law school or Boston College's law school or Boston University's law school? We'd have to invest so much to do it right. Do we need it? Do we need another law school? Do we need one here?"

So it was the same kind of thinking I was going through. Maybe I'm overly cautious. I don't know. Maybe that's a fault of mine, but it seemed to me, at least at the time, that we had so many other needs, and that as long as our faculty were being overtaxed and underpaid, and the staff as well, that ought to have been our highest priority, to build what we had, the land-grant things that we had, to their fullest before we started thinking about additions.

Honhart: I want to thank you very much on behalf of the project for your contributions. I appreciate the time you spent with us.

DiBiaggio: I hope you can filter through all that and make sense, because every time I read a transcript I say, "Gee, did I really talk that way?"

Charnley: But that's an oral history transcript as opposed to a written document, and that's one of the nice things about an oral history.

Honhart: Thank you very much.

DiBiaggio: Thank you both for coming. It's kind of you to come all the way here.

[End of interview]

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