

Interview with Dianna Gardner

Interviewed by Ann Pflaum, Assistant Dean University College,
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Dianna Gardner - DG

Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: This is the 21st of February, and I'm interviewing Dianna Gardner. Dianna, if you could explain when you came to the university and your roll in the university.

DG: I came to the university June 15, 1970, as a principal secretary, and I have remained in this same office, the president's office, for almost thirty years now, doing budget, personnel, special projects, assisting the president and the assistants to the president.

AP: That means that you first came when Mac [Malcolm] Moos was president?

DG: Yes.

AP: He had been president from '67-'74. That also was, in a way, the epicenter of the time of student demonstrations.

DG: Yes.

AP: Do you have any memories of how the president and the president's office got involved in some of those things?

DG: Oh, definitely. I think now when we have student demonstrations that they are nothing compared to what we went through in the '70s. Students now just don't know how to do it compared to then. But maybe the issues aren't as volatile, either. We worked under police protection for a good amount of time. I got to know the police officers very well. Buildings were locked; students were here; it was frightening at times, with pounding on the door and wondering if glass was going to break. I remember that Mac Moos was terrific at handling demonstrations, I believe. And the blockading of Washington Avenue when he went over there and spoke to them, and I think he got that taken care of. I remember when Johnston Hall was closed down because of the demonstrations one day, and the payroll person over there was quite frightened and she went home . . . locked up the paychecks and went home. We had a young man who came in and he was quite upset. He needed his paycheck and she wasn't there to give it to him. So President Moos dipped into his own pocket and gave the young man a loan and sent him on his way. It was kind of nice to see.

AP: So the young man came over from Johnston and knocked on the president's door.

DG: He came to talk to whoever was here. He was a little upset that he needed his paycheck and he couldn't get it, and when was he going to be able to get it? Mac Moos did give him the money out of his own pocket.

AP: He must have written a check, because someone's paycheck would have been too large . . . or did he carry a lot of cash around?

DG: The president, I think, just gave him a little loan to tide him over until he could . . . I can't remember exactly how much it was. I remember the day when we had a very large demonstration out on the mall, and the Minneapolis Police were involved also. It got quite . . . It was kind of frightening, and they actually deployed tear gas.

AP: Now that was May of '72, and Moos was in fact in Canada, not on the campus, so it was Paul Cashman that ended up, if I'm correct, handling that demonstration.

DG: Or Gene Eidenberg, because Gene Eidenberg was the assistant vice president for administration, I believe, at that time, and I think Gene Eidenberg was more in charge . . .

AP: . . . more in charge than Cashman. Cashman was vice president for student affairs.

DG: They certainly would have consulted on what they did. I remember they tear gassed late in the afternoon and I was on my way home. I was just appalled that the Minneapolis Police did that. There were children leaving the day care centers in the area and there was tear gas in the air. I called back to the university and was quite upset, and talked to Gene Eidenberg and told him I thought that was a terrible thing to happen. "There are children walking out there, and there's tear gas in the air!" I remember that day quite vividly.

AP: What was Moos like?

DG: He was a wonderful storyteller, a good writer. I think if you walked into a room and you saw him, you knew he was somebody even if you didn't know who he was. He had a distinguished shock of white hair and carried himself so straight, and loved to tell stories about his experiences and his children's experiences and his own professional life. He loved to sit down with you and talk to you about those things. I think he was a very good president at the time of the demonstrations. He had a lot of patience; he took a personal interest in going out and talking to people. I think he was instrumental in keeping the calm on this campus compared to what other campuses were going through at this same period of time.

AP: Shall we fast forward to President Peter Magrath?

DG: Sure.

AP: Peter came in the Fall of 1974 and you knew him well. How would you describe his particular strengths and contributions?

DG: I think Dr. Magrath came in at a time when the legislative relations were in need of repair. He was very strong on board relations; he had a wonderful board of regents, a very supportive board of regents at that time. I think he was instrumental in repairing out relationships with the legislature and enjoyed a good reputation there, and the university I think benefited from the legislative period at that time. That was good for the university.

AP: Although it also was a period punctuated with . . . Really beginning in '71 was the first time we had major state fiscal shortfalls that affected the university's budgets. So one of the things that Magrath had to deal with was retrenchment in a way that his predecessors had not had to deal with before. I want to test an insight . . . One of the documents that we found quoted a faculty member, but I can't remember which one right now, who said that one of the unintended impacts of the time of austerity and strategic planning, the long-range planning that Magrath instituted, was that it shifted power on the deans and the colleges to the vice presidential level as they had to jockey back and forth for where you were going to spend the small number of dollars that you had; where were you going to take it away from to get it? You had to do that at the vice presidential level rather than the dean's level. The insight is that the relative prosperity at the end of the '90s and the better financial management and controls that are now available mean that you shifted power back to the deans under Yudof, where more decisions were getting pushed to the deans than to the vice presidents. So you're sort of pulling out that level of decision making that was necessary at the time but that may not be necessary as much any more. Any observations about that? Does that make sense?

DG: I think with any administration, out of all the administrations, everybody's perception becomes their reality, and whether or not you really took the power away from the deans or whether you worked with them differently . . . I guess I believe the absolute decision making authority does still and always has rested with the vice presidents and the president. While deans over the years have been involved in many different ways and to differing degrees, I think it's the degree of their involvement, not taking the power away.

AP: I think that's true. I think I may have overstated what the person meant, that there became a much more pivotal role in reallocation of resources for the vice presidents that wasn't there. When you didn't have to reallocate, you didn't have to have vice presidential involvement, but when times were tougher those problems . . .

DG: But I think that's also working styles of various people. Every time you have a new administration, you have a different working style. How one president or vice presidents will work is entirely different than the way another one will be. It could very well be a preference to working style in how you get things done.

AP: Let's move forward then. We've talked a little bit about Peter Magrath. Let's talk about Ken Keller. Any comments or thoughts you'd like to make on that tumultuous period?

DG: I think Ken Keller is a very, very bright man. He got a bum wrap in some ways. I think his heart was with the university; he'd been here for twenty years. To be characterized as somebody coming from New York with a New York attitude—I've heard that said about him—he'd been here for a long time and he loved this university and still does. Maybe some of his ideas were

ahead of what people wanted to do. Maybe he was looking for change too fast. There again, I think it was his working style; how he worked was not how Peter Magrath worked. You add ten years of working under one type of arrangement with Dr. Magrath, who consulted widely on everything, to Ken Keller, who made decisions and stuck by them. I think President Hasselmo, over and over again, has said that they is continuing the work that President Keller started. Hasselmo's was a different approach to communicating it and to following through with it, but it was based on President's Keller's thoughts and ideas.

AP: That certainly confirms everything we have found, that three presidents all were a piece in finding focus, that you've got Magrath, Keller and Hasselmo all working out the question of how do you manage the university at a time when you don't have as much resources to do as much as you used to? How do you, then, characterize Yudof in this grouping of presidents?

DG: I think he's a very energetic man and has lots and lots of ideas. The one thing I see with President Yudof is that he really is very good at delegating authority, giving you his idea and letting you run with it. That probably gets more people involved. The ultimate decision comes down to his, but he gets the university involved at a very early state in a lot of things. I think he has also stated that he is continuing the work that President Hasselmo was doing on the . . . not Commitment to Focus, but whatever we call it these days. So he is also carrying on . . .

AP: . . . part of this question of finding the right balance for the mission and roles of the university between the research and undergraduate education; between the populist outreach and the more competitive entry type situations; between being independent of the other institutions and being partners with them. It almost seems like he's a synthesis, that he has been able in some ways to as effectively synthesize as any of his predecessors.

DG: I think so.

AP: I think he uses humor in an extraordinary way effectively.

DG: And some of it is humor directed at himself, and he's very good at doing that. On all of the presidents, you're going through different times and different eras, and there are some different problems and there are some things that have remained the same. When Mr. Yudof came in, and I was talking to him early on in the process, I told him, "You know, I've never worked for a president who hasn't had a major athletic scandal at the very early stages of his presidency." He found that to be true. It's true—I had not worked for a president in thirty years that has not had to deal with a major athletic scandal. But there are other things going on. Moos had to deal with the demonstrations at the time, the gay liberation movement, the Vietnam war, which is different than what . . . And he was an external president at the time. We needed an external president from what I understand. When Magrath came in, the university felt they needed more of an internal president. So that focus switched. The university goes back and forth on that. So I don't know if any president has found yet the center ground on "Are you an external or internal?" because we have to be both.

AP: Right. Another tension that you're managing, and you have the key relationship with legislature, and I think a relationship really from Hasselmo on, or from Keller on, is the

relationship with private donors. The major private fundraising is a change, beginning with the Foundation in '62, and then really heightened by the first capital campaign . . .

DG: I think every major university has undergone that change, too.

AP: What that stems from is the changing federal funding or changing state funding. We are no longer as substantially assisted by those two sources as we used to be. That has an implication for our whole role and identity. So it's a whole new set of constituencies that we need to be better at relating to. Do you have any thought or observations, one of them is that the spouse of the president needs to be involved or has been traditionally been involved a lot in the life of the university, unlike the spouse of any other university employee. Do you have any observations on that point?

DG: I think the spouses of all the presidents have been very involved in the university because they have to be. In some ways it's a . . . You're not going to see your husband unless you do some things with him for the good of the university. The president's role is a very public role, and coming into the presidency I don't know that all presidents coming in from the outside understand that. This is a very public, very open university, very much a part of the community, and you and your spouse are very involved in all of that. Your life is not your own anymore. I believe as much as the spouse can be involved in the community, be involved in university affairs—not decision making, but being there with the president. Outreach is very important. It's what we do in the office. It's the care and feeding of everybody involved with the president so that you make the life of the president and the university a better place by being there, by meeting with people, by being open, opening your home. Diane Skomars opened the president's home—really opened it up—and other spouses have followed in that. It's much more open now than it has been. That makes your own private life a little more difficult, too, because you've got a whole floor of your house that is open to the public. That's difficult to have a private life anymore. But I think it's very important. It's very important work that the spouses of the presidents do. But you have to find a balance, and finding that balance is also difficult, I think.

AP: Are there thoughts about working as a civil service employee at the university that you have -- different categories of employees. In some of the interview people have said, "We want to be sure to appreciate the civil service employees or the bargaining unit employees and their contribution to the university." Do you have any observations on that theme?

DG: I have been a civil service employee here for thirty years. I've been very fortunate to work for people who appreciate what you do, and they let you know it. Sometimes that's just a thank you. With each individual you have your own ways of wanting to be recognized, and what's important to me may not be the same thing that's important to somebody else. I've been very fortunate in this office as a civil service employee. I've been allowed to grow, to try new things, and I think there are a lot of departments within the university that do do that. But I think there are also people who don't have those same pleasures in all of the categories. But I think all of the civil service, the bargaining unit, the professional and administrative staff, the faculty—they all have important roles in this university and have to work together to accomplish anything.

AP: One of the things I always ask at this point in the interview is, Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would like to comment on?

DG: I would hope that you ask everybody how they feel about the university. I think this is a great place for all of us to be, and I think it does great things. The media doesn't tend to tell us about the great things that the university does, only the bad things. I think it's incumbent on all of us to put that word out there.

AP: If I was a newcomer and moved in next door to you, let's say I moved in from Texas or California, and I said to you, "Dianna, tell me a little bit about the University of Minnesota." What would you say, and you said to me it does wonderful things.

DG: This is one of the major universities in the United States. We've at times had, I think, the most students enrolled here. There is certainly great research going on here. We have world renowned doctors. I think it says something that our former presidents hold positions in Washington in the major organizations that we are involved in. We nurture good people, and those people go on to other places and do other things. We have so many inventions that have come out of this university. I think everybody has got to realize that we have our good points and our bad points, but if you looked at it as a total, the good points of this university with its faculty, with its students, with the research programs, the colleges, down into the departments, are very strong. We all have to keep believing that and keep making them better instead of focusing on some of the other things that may be aren't so good. I think the focus of this university has certainly become . . . We can't be everything to everybody, and you have to focus on what your strong points are and sort of choose your battles, so to speak, in what programs we aren't going to do. I think that's making a better university out of it. There are great people here. The great people here make this a great university.

AP: Maybe that's a good place to end. Thank you.

[end of interview]