

Interview with Patricia Spence

Interviewed by Ann Pflaum

Interviewed on September 3, 1999

Patricia Spence - PS
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: This is Ann Pflaum. It is September 3, 1999. I am interviewing the Honorable Patricia Spence, who is the chairman of the Board of Regents.

Pat, if you would start with a little bit of your own background, I would be delighted.

PS: Sure, I'm happy to, Ann. I'm a graduate of the Willmar Community College. I had an associate of science degree there, attended two years and, then, transferred to the University of Minnesota in 1969 to complete my undergraduate work. I graduated in December 1971 with a Bachelor of Science degree in home economics education. That degree, I think, is now obsolete. [laughter] I think they call it human ecology. I just had a wonderful experience at the University of Minnesota.

I went out as the first intern teacher to Staples, Minnesota, where I taught home economics then for six years. Three of those years, I also [unclear] a U.S. office of education curriculum development grant to address issues with rural use and self-concept development and those kinds of family life issues that were so needed. We tested that curriculum in five states, including one Indian reservation site in Minnesota. After that, my husband and I purchased a retail business in Little Falls where we lived for about fifteen years. Nine of those years, I was mayor of Little Falls and, for a couple of years, I was the director of the Morrison County Economic Development. When we left there, we moved to Alden in southern Minnesota, where my husband became an elementary principal.

When we moved back then to central Minnesota, after three years down there, I was nominated to be a candidate for the Board of Regents. Three years earlier, Former Governor Elmer L. Andersen had nominated me and called me and asked me to apply to be a regent. The timing wasn't right because we were moving and I'd never really thought about being a regent. Then, I was nominated again and I assumed it was him again, so I called him and I said, "Elmer, you didn't give up on me." He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I got another nomination form in the mail." He said, "I didn't nominate you this time. But it's a great idea. You should be sure to apply," so I filled out the papers and, then, you know the rest of the process I went through and I became a regent. I began my term as a regent in 1995.

AP: Can I take a momentary detour?

PS: Of course.

AP: One of the people that almost everyone mentions from the early 1950s on throughout the five decades that we're studying is Elmer Andersen. How did you get to know him?

PS: I first met him through the connection with the Charles Lindbergh Foundation. At the time that I was mayor, he was the chair of the board of that foundation and, of course, Little Falls is the boyhood home of Charles Lindbergh. We had set up symposiums where scientists who receive foundation awards for their research would come back for symposiums in Little Falls every five years. He happened to come to Little Falls for one of those symposiums. I had my first meeting with him there. My next meeting with him was on the airfield at Le Bourget when we went for the sixtieth anniversary of Lindbergh's flight. That's where I really got to know him and just was totally amazed with who he was as a person. We became friends and I stayed in contact with him, then, through visits to Little Falls or through letters and different governmental things. I remember a summer when Anne Morrow Lindbergh was coming with some of the family members to Minnesota and Governor [Rudy] Perpich was receiving them as official guests at the governor's mansion and I went to the event and Elmer Andersen was also there. Governor Perpich gave a brief welcome and, then, Elmer got up on the staircase and gave ten minutes of remarks and there wasn't a dry eye in the room. He just made such an impression on me, so when he nominated me to be a regent, I took it pretty seriously, but the timing wasn't right. Then, when I made it through the second process, I learned that I'd been nominated by the Blandin Foundation. When I became a viable candidate, I think—well, I know—Elmer went to the Capitol and I suppose, at that time, he was about eighty-six and went door-to-door and spoke with legislators on my behalf. That just was mind boggling to me that someone was willing to do that.

AP: Did he give you advice when you joined the regents?

PS: He gave me advice before I joined and he's given me advice many times during my tenure. I've visited with him at his home or communicated by phone or a letter.

AP: Presidents of the university have mentioned the same quality, that his advice is exceptional.

PS: It is. He's so thoughtful and really cares deeply. It's so nice to have someone with his background and experience and wisdom to rely on for advice.

AP: That's wonderful.

PS: President [Mark] Yudof visits with him.

AP: That's interesting. It is remarkable; he has been through five decades as one of our major state resources. It's so exciting to have the library named after him.

PS: Isn't it great! He is so thrilled. He sent a note the other day and he said, "Just to let you know that I just bid on some additional rare books for the university."

AP: That's exciting.

Now, you joined the board then in 1995. Can you characterize how it seemed to you? You'd been on the Higher Education Coordinating Board so that you were familiar with the university. Was it an odd transition to go from the Higher Education Coordinating Board, which, after all, had a kind of quasi review role over the university, not absolute because of our autonomy but sort of semi... I don't know quite how to describe it.

PS: I would agree with you, Ann.

AP: So, you were coming from a position of quite a lot of knowledge. Probably, you would have had more information about the university than a lot of other regents joining it from other walks of life.

PS: Yes, I found it very helpful to have served in that capacity. I think it gives you an excellent perspective on all of higher education in Minnesota, including the private colleges. I don't think most regents really understand the issues and the policy kinds of discussions that go on in all three of those areas. When I was on the Higher Education Coordinating Board, of course, there were many more divisions. We didn't have MnSCU [Minnesota State College and Universities] at that time. It gave me a lot of policy background that I don't think other regents have. So, I found it very valuable. I also had made some connections and knew people that are still involved in higher education, including you.

AP: That's right. It was a wonderful board, the Higher Education Board, with very good staff and, of course, pieces of it still exist.

PS: Sure.

AP: I was just looking at the HESO [Higher Education Service Office] numbers the other day. It is quite a fine little service. What was it like? Jean Keffeler was chair when you joined the board?

PS: Yes.

AP: What would you like to say about this, when you joined and as you've experienced the board?

PS: When I first joined the board, I found—how would I describe this?—a very difficult environment, somewhat negative in nature as far as working towards common goals or having a common vision of what the university should be doing and how the vision should be carried out. There was a definite clique on the board who did not see eye-to-eye with the president or the administration, so there was a constant aura of conflict on the board. Personally, I found it rather embarrassing because I don't think you can accomplish anything without cohesiveness of vision and

the willingness to listen to differing points of view but to come to a common agreement and carry that forward. I just didn't find that people were working *for* the university; they had many personal agendas. I think, individually, they believed that they were working for the university, so I don't want you to misunderstand that. It just was not working for the good of the university. In fact, I think it was very damaging.

Then, in the next election of regents, I think much more care was taken to select regents who clearly understood policy versus management, to choose people who had more background in working on boards, working with other people in a similar environment, and people who had good communication skills. I think that was a real turning point for the board.

Another turning point was the selection of our new president because he works very hard at open communication and complete consultation on policy issues, or even issues that you might say are administrative and are areas where he could go ahead and make the decision without board authority. But because he believes they are so important to the university, he will consult fully and creates an environment that's much more conducive to getting work done in a positive way.

AP: Do you want to say anything, briefly, about some of the big issues? I'm thinking of the General College issue and I'm thinking of the tenure issue. Are there any things you'd like to observe about that?

PS: Yes. I think with both of those issues, Ann, they made the university look bad in the eyes of the people of this state because we weren't working together. You and I have talked about this before, but I think, largely, that the problem was due to miscommunication, assumptions being made by administration that they had the support of the board. We were not consulted fully. We weren't given time to study the issue or to get background. There was not proper consultation with the faculty or with the community. It was very negative for the university. We, basically, since President Yudof has been in office have not had anything occur like that and it's because we've had such full consultation and take the time to deal with a difficult issue. We have community plans now where we go out and talk with community members before a decision is made so that they can have input. You can avoid a lot of problems when you take the time to follow those steps.

AP: Do you want to say anything on the tenure issue?

PS: Sure. As I look back on that horrible period of dealing with the tenure issue—President [Nils] Hasselmo and I have talked about it—I think the problem came in that the regents and the president and others on the executive team of the administration started off with what we understood to be the same goals. We had a list of areas that we wanted to study, actually listed in a formal resolution of the board. But as we went through the study of that, I think trust was damaged: the faculty lost trust in their leadership; some administrators lost trust in the president; and the regents lost trust in the president. We didn't stay focused on the goals and different segments of the entire governance system started to pull away from those goals and go off in separate directions. We didn't stay together. When you lose trust, it becomes very difficult to work on an issue that's as volatile as tenure.

Toward the end of the tenure discussions, I sat next to Professor [Fred] Morrison at the Bureau of Mediation Services and I said, "Professor Morrison, I don't understand why the faculty is so unwilling to discuss this issue openly because this is an institution that values academic freedom and we should be able to talk about anything, any subject." His answer to me was that the faculty had no trust in the administration and that, over the years, every time that the faculty felt that the administration had violated an understanding, they added another layer of process into the tenure code. He said that until that trust is rebuilt, they weren't willing to change the tenure code. I thought, what a sad state of affairs. But I think, he was, probably, very honest and, probably, very accurate in his statement.

AP: Some of the people that we have interviewed feel that it ended up all right, that it was a very rocky period but that the end point was livable. How would you view the way the thing ended up at the end?

PS: Yes, I do feel positive about it. I feel badly for the relationships that were damaged because there were some that were very damaged and it's taken a long time to rebuild them. Some people were very hurt. Especially, I think, some of the faculty members that were involved that were in leadership positions were very hurt through the process. I think we have a better tenure code. I think we developed some really strong positive relationships with the faculty. I think board members clearly evaluated how their role absolutely has to stay in policy areas and how you have to work in total consultation and cooperation and support of the president. If you're not able to do that, then you need to change the president. So, we have a better tenure code. We have a better understanding of our role. I think people are more committed, much more committed, to working together.

AP: Are there other issues that strike you, besides the ones we've named, that you'd like to comment on from the 1990s?

PS: I think another very difficult issue that—or a couple of them—came up were the steam plant. I wasn't on the board when that conversation started, but, again, it seemed to me that if there had been better consultation with the community, there wouldn't have been so many hard feelings. The other issue, of course, that's been really difficult in the 1990s was ALG [Antilymphocytic Globulin], but I feel that the board handled that very well...and the administration. I think those would be the four really major issues that would stand out.

AP: You had a regents' retreat recently?

PS: Yes.

AP: I suspect that a retreat at the end of a millennium must be a retreat unlike others. Can you capture, if any of it is public information and you feel like sharing it, the kinds of things that the regents are thinking about?

PS: Sure. We took just a very brief amount of time to look back at the past few years and note what's gone well and what hasn't. Then, we took another piece of time to discuss national trends in higher education and which issues we feel we need to focus on that are national in perspective, that

are related to the University of Minnesota. Some of those would be like K-12 education and teacher preparation, intercollegiate athletics, and the issue of how is it that we maintain the student athlete, technology, the Academic Health Center, the vitality of medical education and how we can maintain that at the university. We spent a lot of time talking about the university's role in economic development in the state and how we can reward faculty better for all three aspects of the mission and that relates back to the tenure talk a little bit—although we didn't label it tenure. It bothers a lot of the regents that faculty can't be rewarded as much for outreach or service to the community as they can for research or teaching, so we spent some time talking about that... then, also, diversity and admissions and hiring and retention. The president talked about his work plan for the next couple of years and we reacted to that. Then, we just spent a lot of time, Ann, almost a full day, really delving into the policy issues that the board feels strongly that we need to address that fit the president's work plan and how we can best approach them and get some things accomplished. So, it was a real working retreat.

AP: Are there particular policy issues that you would feel comfortable mentioning?

PS: Oh, sure. I'll kind of go committee-by-committee; I can sort things better in my mind. For Educational Planning and Policy, we talked about outreach a lot and the reward of faculty for outreach and some institutional performance measurement goals for outreach; the university at Rochester and a plan of action of the steps that will be necessary for that to be a true campus, an independent campus, of the university; the metropolitan higher education strategy and how we can take a much stronger role now with that because we just don't feel we've been making adequate progress in that area; we talked a lot about undergraduate education and the environment for undergraduates and that kind of overlaps between Educational Planning and Policy and Faculty, Staff, and Student Affairs. There are aspects of that that would fall under each committee. We talked about enrollment management strategies.

In Facilities, we talked about updating the master plan. This is somewhat political in nature, I guess, we're a little bit frustrated with the State Design Selection Board choosing the architects for university buildings because we find that there's not always a good match between their selection and the building project. Sometimes, we end up with an architectural firm that specializes in contemporary architecture doing an addition to one of our historic buildings and things just don't go well or we have an architect right now for the tennis facility that's never done a facility like that. So, things fall behind schedule and, then, they cost us more money. We talked about whether or not we could play a role with the legislature in changing that process. We talked about working with Dinkytown on business and neighborhood improvements. We talked about the importance of making sure that our capital plan is totally tied to the academic priorities. I think that pretty much takes care of what we talked about with that committee.

In Faculty, Staff, and Student Affairs, we talked about the diversity of the student body and the faculty and staff as being a priority to address and access to the University of Minnesota. We spent a lot of time talking about how we would approach improving the total quality of the experience for students, faculty, and staff. We think that we don't always spend enough time, especially discussing the professional staff at the university, or union employees. We spend most of our time on students

and faculty and we need to address all of the areas. Another priority we want to work on is international education. We discussed things like credit card debt, student health. I think that's pretty much that area.

Then in the Financial and Audit area... clarifying the role of the treasurer and ratifying our long-term investment strategy. We have two new committees that we have approved in the last year that would be committees of the board. One is a Debt Management Committee and another one is an Investment Advisory Committee, so we need to implement that this year.

Then, just broader issues for the full board... We've made as our top priority redoing the Delegation of Authority Policy. It's outdated and there is no much ambiguity because of the changes in the administrative structure. There are overlap areas. There are areas that are in total conflict where we'll say, "The board delegates something to the president," and then in another paragraph of the policy, it says, "The board delegates it to a provost," and we don't have provosts, the separate areas that we had when [Phillips] Shively and so forth were there. That's one top priority for the coming year. Then, we decided to develop a subcommittee of the board to delve into some of the really tough policy issues related to the health of the Academic Health Center and medical education. Then, they'll come back to the full board with some recommendations. Also doing a board self-assessment... It's a number of years since the board has been evaluated, so we decided that we needed to do that. I think those are the main areas, Ann, that we talked about.

AP: May I ask you this question? When you meet a colleague from another state... I imagine you participate occasionally in the Association of Governing Boards?

PS: Right.

AP: If someone says, "Give me the essence of Minnesota." Let's say you're talking to somebody who is on a board in New York or a board in California or a board someplace else. Do you have a sense that we are somewhat different from other, say, Big Ten universities or public universities?

PS: Oh, yes! I do. We have similar issues to deal with, but I always come away feeling very fortunate to be a regent at the University of Minnesota because of a couple things. First of all, we have much greater support throughout the state for education, preschool through higher education. There's just a tremendous value put on education here and that makes our job much easier because our support is greater and people support us in our work.

AP: Do you have any sense as to why that is in Minnesota?

PS: I think it's cultural. I think it goes back to the people that comprised the state and the fact that a major research land-grant university was even started in a state with as small a population as Minnesota. Our history speaks well for us. It's not something that's just happened. I think it's been there since the beginning and it's continued to be a value in our state. I feel really fortunate. President Yudof has commented on that that even between Texas and Minnesota, there's so much stronger support for education here than there is in Texas.

I lost my other thought.

AP: Oh, I'm sorry that I interrupted you. [pause] We can add it later...not a problem.

At this point in the interview, I always ask people, is there anything else that you would like to add that I have, perhaps, not asked you?

PS: Just that it's such a wonderful opportunity to be able to serve the University of Minnesota as a regent because it's an incredibly fine institution. I think there's just so much to be proud of.

AP: Do you want to say anything about the intercollegiate athletic issue that is going to be on the minds of a number of people...basketball or the role of athletes? You alluded to it a little bit in the sense that some of the regents' agendas will be dealing with the student experience.

PS: The values of the regents and the president are that, first of all, we have gender equity in our athletics programs, that that has to be achieved and, secondly, that the athletes at the university have to, first and foremost, have a good student experience and be able to be successful. We'll be looking at that total environment and what is it that we need to change to make sure that that can happen here? Until we get the report, I guess, Ann, I don't have enough information to know what it is that we'll have to do, but I'm sure that there will be actions that we have to take to make some changes. We'll be in consultations, also, as regents and the president, with the Faculty Consultative Committee to look at the academic issues that are involved with that. I think there will be a lot of study. I think, sometimes, out of problems, you can get some really positive changes, so that's what I'm hoping for.

AP: That's, perhaps, a very nice phrase to end with. Thank you, Pat, very much.

PS: You're welcome.

[break in the interview as Patricia Spence speaks off-the-record about Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh]

AP: Thank you very much for the interview. I will send up a permission form.

PS: Okay.

AP: What is your address?

PS: It's 8900 Lakewood Shores Road Northwest, Rice, Minnesota, 56367.

AP: Perfect. I'll put it in the mail. Thanks very much.

PS: Thank you, Ann. It was fun to visit with you.

AP: Good. Take care.

PS: You, too. Bye, bye.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[End of the Interview]

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