CUNY Digital History Archive
Transcription of Interview with Basil Wilson
Interviewer: Jerry Markowitz

December 17, 1999
New York, NY

Basil Wilson: My name is Basil Wilson, and I'm the Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Jerry Markowitz: Provost Wilson, you have been the Provost since what year approximately?

Basil: For too long. Since Gerald Markowitz and Serena Nanda drafted me to become the Provost. I started as a Provost in June, July of 1990.

Jerry: And, I guess you came into office at a very turbulent time in the life of the college.

Basil: Extremely turbulent time, in fact I have memories of sleeping on these couches that you see in the office. Based upon the unrest that took place 91. So it was a very difficult period for the college. I think we were at that moment extremely polarized. I mean the faculty felt as if they had been estranged from their students. The students felt that they lost confidence in the institution and I think the administration was really stunned by the fury of the students. So I think that it was a very, very difficult time for the institution and we had find ways to bring about healing, to address the issues raised by the students, and to make certain that we could continue to function as an effective institution. I mean, my other remarkable things about the college is that their different components and each component is essential to the mechanism working effectively. I mean, you can't run a college without a faculty who are excited and enthusiastic and committed to their students. An institution can't function effectively unless students trust the institution and believe in the faculty and have a high regard for the whole learning process and have confidence in the administration. And of course the administration cannot be successful in what they're doing unless they have the support of the faculty, the confidence of their students. So it's a team approach. And I think what had happened in '89, '90, and '91 is that we were really in a state of disarray and we had to take stock of ourselves, learn from our shortcomings, from our mistakes, and to bring about a rebirth, a renewal of the college. And I think, you know, we have done that.

Jerry: As both a scholar as well as participant, how do you see, what do you see is the reasons why the college reached that point? I mean, what was happening prior to '89 that lead us to this state of crisis?

[00:03:30]

Basil: I think the college had changed dramatically in terms of its demographics, and that change had not been understood by the faculty or the administration. I think that change reflected what was also taking place in New York City. We had become a predominantly minority institution. I mean, when John Jay College started, we were a predominantly white student population, largely comprised of people from the uniform service. Over the years we became a pre-in-service college and in fact in-service personnel became a minority at the college, and that has a lot to do with the professionalization that has taken place in law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Where John Jay had established this reputation and attracted a critical mass of people who came here specifically, not because they were already working in criminal justice institutions, but because they aspired to work in criminal justice institution. It became a gateway to the middle class kingdom, and so John Jay was really serving in that perspective, and so when you looked at the student population, it had changed dramatically. But I don't think we had really been aware of that dramatic shift and I don't think we had responded to it in a very energetic and creative way. And so I think based upon that a certain alienation set in with this new student body. I think there's also something very unusual that took place during these years. There was a coming together of student leaders, which I don't think we will see ever in the history of the college again. I mean, that to me was just a stroke of happenstance in historical terms. I mean, many of these folks, whether you wanted to see them as being Machiavellian or not, they had sharp leadership skills. Many of them were very good oratorically. Many of them knew the system. They knew how to manipulate the system. They knew how to mobilize the student body, and they just used every device, every trick in the book, to really achieve the objectives that they set out to do. One of the things they were concerned with, they wanted to make certain that the administration and the faculty would be responsive to their needs. Whether it had to do with extended library hours, whether it had to do with making certain the voice of students were heard. So I think that, in making the institution more democratic and more sensitive, and more diverse, I think that, just based upon that experience, we learned a great deal from it. And I think, in some respects, John Jay College has become a model institution in a very diverse and changing setting.

Jerry: Do you think that the student protests were fundamentally different or fundamentally similar to the student protests of the 1960s?

Basil: I think the protest of the 1960s dealt largely with national issues, national causes, whether it's just the civil rights movements, whether it was the anti-Vietnam movement. Those were really issues dealing with much larger questions. I think

much of the burning issues on the John Jay College campus had a lot to do with the particularities of higher education and the particularities of John Jay College. For example, they were insisting in having a far more diverse faculty than what existed at the time. I think they were insisting in having an institution that was cognizant of the needs of the student population and wanted the administration to be much more responsive to those needs. So I think that some of those issues that I've outlined such as affirmative action, such as diversifying of faculty, are in essence national issues. But I think much of it, as it was raised during '89, '90, and even '91, had to do with the specificity of John Jay College.

[0:08:40]

Jerry: Did your understanding of the protest change when you, in the first two years, when you were a faculty member, versus the last year of the student protest, when you became provost?

Basil: Well, as a faculty member, I had worked very closely with the clubs. The clubs really constituted the essence of student life at the college. I worked with the Caribbean Club for many, many years, with the Organization of Black Students for many, many years. And so I always had a pulse on the life of the college. And I'd seen that there was an alienation developing and I had mentioned it to a number of people. I mentioned it to Carolyn Tricomi, who was the Dean of Students at the time. I mentioned it to Bob Dempsey, who was the Director of Student Activities. I realized that there was developing this gulf that divided John Jay College as an institution from its students. And it had a lot to do with race. And it had a lot to do with how students perceived that they were being treated. I think Carolyn tried her best to bridge that gap, but it was a very difficult time for her and it was a very difficult time for the institution, and we were dealing with some very difficult student leaders. But I recognized that something was amiss, and I realized that in order for the institution not to be affected disastrously or damaged in any way, we had to find a way to bridge that gap. And I think you and I and a number of other faculty members tried to do that once the disintegration had already set in. It is very difficult to do, and I think before this the disintegration actually set in and we were all involved in trying to get back the buildings that were seized and trying to bring about some healing afterwards because we recognized that it wasn't just the seizure of the buildings, it was what kind of institution we would become afterwards. I didn't become the provost until the second year, that we had these troubles. But I think in '91, '91 differed from '89 and '90 in the sense that by 1990, the college had begun to change, I think in a very fundamental way. We had established the Town Hall Meeting. We were meeting with students on our regular manner. Roger Witherspoon had become the Dean of Students later became the Vice President of Student Development. We met with students on a daily, sometimes hourly basis, to the extent that some of the faculty were concerned that I wasn't functioning as a provost but as Vice President of Students. But that is what was needed at the time. We had to find ways to win the confidence of the students and to convince them that we had their best interest at heart and what it is that we needed to do in order to

work effectively together. And so when the rupture occurred in '91, it didn't have the mass appeal and it didn't have the mass support, and we had in fact the vast majority of the leadership of the student body, and so the '91 uprising simply fizzled out, because it just didn't have that support. The issues that they were raising were really not critical issues because most of those critical issues had already been attended.

[00:13:10]

Jerry: Is it your sense that the John Jay students were also cooperating with students outside of John Jay in these protests?

Basil: Oh yes. This was a student movement. I mean, it certainly involved students from Lehman College, from Hunter College. But I think John Jay was in the leadership of that movement, and so this is the reason why the difficulties here were much more painstaking and lasted much longer on this campus than any other of the campuses. I mean, our disputes were far more bitter. If you recall the '89 dispute was really triggered by the tuition increase, but our problems were more than just the tuition increase. I mean, the students felt that there were problems of a particular John Jay College nature and until we were able to solve the John Jay College problems, that's when we thought we were able to re-rail the institution and start functioning effectively as a college.

Jerry: How did you feel the faculty responded to these protests? Was there healing that had to take place with the faculty as well as with the students?

Basil: Well, there certainly was healing that had to take place, and the healing didn't take place automatically. I mean, there were a lot of people who were bruised by these incidents. I mean, there were a number of fisticuffs that took place between students and faculty. There were a number of confrontations that took place between students and faculty. And so, even when the buildings were returned, and we resumed a state of functionality, there were many faculty who were, who wanted to see students punished. In fact, there were many students who wanted to see administrators and faculty punished. And I think we had to go beyond this ideology of punishment or vindictiveness. I mean, we had to begin to see each other as human beings and to talk about what is it that had brought about this estrangement. And we had some very difficult meetings. Very, very difficult meetings. I remember having a meeting in the T Building, largely with faculty, we had many faculty really wanted to make certain that the students would have been punished. They would have either been expelled or what, because they felt if there was no punishment then it would just be a reward for such behavior to reoccur. And so therefore, if you recall, I think somebody like a Maria Volpe with her mediation skills, was very, very important role that certainly in '91 and in the years before. I knew of faculty members who felt that the college would never recover from these incidents, that the college had been destroyed, that the college had been hurt permanently, and we would never be the same again. But, one of the things that I think is peculiar about

the John Jay College faculty is that there is a core faculty who see this place not just as one where they work, but they really and truly love John Jay College and are dedicated and committed to the institution. And I think it is that core faculty who came together and really worked arduously in conjunction with students, with administrators, to really reconstruct the college. And we did it, and I think we did it effectively.

[0:17:14]

Jerry: How long do you think that process took?

Basil: I think it took a few springs after '91. Because after '91 there was always a fear whenever the spring season would come around, was there gonna be another take over? So that specter of fear ripped us for a quite a few years afterwards. I would say we really became, I'd say the oneness took hold maybe around '93, '94, and I think most of us learned a great deal from that experience and I hope we don't have to relive it anymore. But, I think there's a certain bonding and trust that took place among faculty leaders and administration personnel who where involved in those difficult years, and I think based upon the dialogue that that opened up, I think we've become a far more democratic and open institution since then. The faculty having access to administrators, administrators understanding the pivotal rule the faculty play in an institution of this kind and just knowing and building the kind of good will that is necessary to achieve consensus. I think one of the things we have done at this college, and we do it very well in recent years, is how to bring about consensus for the improvement of education and administration at the college.

Jerry: Three issues that arose, that sort of legacies of these student takeovers, were, and you've touched on them a little bit, but I wonder if we could explore them a little bit more, were the conscious dealing with issues of cultural pluralism. Secondly, issues of affirmative action, and the third, the dialogues being institutionalized in terms of the town meetings. So, I wondered if you could talk about each of those, your perspective on how they have been played out at the college.

Basil: I think one of the things I mentioned that had brought about the kind of confrontation that you had in '89, '90, '91, was a change in nature of the student body, and I think the student body did not feel identified with the faculty over the administration. And I think what has happened, during the decade of the 1990s is that you have an administration that has become far more diverse, and you have a faculty that has become far more diverse, both in gender as well as in terms of its racial composition. I think that the affirmative action part of it was also very, very difficult for us, and I think it still is difficult because it's not an issue that we have resolved. It's not an issue where, as you might say, a consensus to the point where it's an effective working consensus. I think we recognized in the early '90s that we had to bring about some changes, and I think there was a consensus about that. And I think we recognize that we can get outstanding faculty and still commit ourselves to diversity. I think that in the classroom, it is essential to have white students

taught by professors of color, just as it is important for students of a Hispanic background or an African American background to be taught by white faculty. And so I think that we in a point where we have this enriching cross-fertilization. Not just of a racial nature but of a gender nature. I think women play and incredible role in this institution. I think that if you look at the diversification of the faculty in terms of gender and the role that female faculty play at this institution, both in the Faculty Senate and the Better Teaching Seminars, in thematic studies, in women's studies, in some of the critical eras of the college. The college has been immensely enriched by the kind of personality predisposition that a female brings to an institution of higher learning. I think a similar occurrence takes place when you have a critical mass of Latinas teaching not just in Puerto Rican studies, but also at a Puerto Rican Center, the same thing with African American studies. And I think that's the same way you need faculty that cut across the ideological spectrum. I think that is what makes a college a very special place and a special experience for people of very impressionable minds. And so I think that we have achieved much in that regards, but I think that's always an ongoing dialogue that has to take place. There's no question in my mind, that the attacks in affirmative action that goes on outside of the college has in fact affected our commitment to affirmative action, and I don't think our commitment has waned in a lot of part of the decade as it now, in comparison to where it was in the early parts of the decade. In terms of the cultural diversity, I think that the student body, we like to speak of the college being a third, a third, a third. A third Hispanic, a third African American, a third white. Of course, if you look at the incoming freshman class, it might be more 30-40% who are Hispanic, African Americans are about 30%, and the white population is about 22%-24%. But it's much more complex than that. I think all categories cannot encompass the complex reality of what goes on in terms of the actual diversity of the college. I think that you have, you speak of a Caribbean population, but there are Hindu Caribbean, as well as Afro Caribbean. You speak of a Dominican, you speak of Hispanic population, but then you large numbers of Dominicans, increasing numbers of Central Americans, and steady numbers of Puerto Ricans. You have a white population, but with increasing numbers of Eastern Europeans, including Russians, Ukrainians, Polish, etc. And, there's a lot of melting, I think, that takes place at the college. I mean, yes, you might see groupings of students based upon their ethnicity, but I think one of the things that has occurred now in the student government is that you see less voting according to predictable patterns, but, and I think that is a reflection of the kind of admixture that is taking place at the institution.

Jerry: How do you think that's been achieved?

Basil: I think that has been achieved by the way the college has reached out to students. I think that Roger Witherspoon's office has done a fantastic job with working with students. I think if you look at Roger's personality, you look at Hector Ortiz's personality, Hank Smith, I think they've been outstanding in terms of how they connect with students. We all go to the student retreats in September, and in January, and it means that we get a chance to interact with student leaders, for them

to see the administration close up. They get an opportunity to raise question and we have an opportunity to get a sense as to what they're concerned so that we can be responsive to their needs, so you don't get this kind of alienation, you don't get this kind of mistrust setting in.
[0:26:41]

Jerry: Do you remember when that started?

Basil: That might have started maybe in the early '90s. I think it started in the early '90s.

Jerry: But it did not occur before?

Basil: No, I'm not aware of its existence before that. I think Roger Witherspoon is the person who really introduced that.

Jerry: And, do faculty also go?

Basil: Faculty have been, but it is sometimes difficult to get faculty up there because they tend to meet in the Poconos, it's on the weekend, and so most of the people who go from the senior citizens realm are administrators and not that many faculty. But faculty advisors sometimes go up and I've seen Kwando Kinshasa and others. But it's a very enriching experience. I think the Town Hall Meeting has held immensely, but let me leave that for the section dealing with communication on the dialogue. But, in terms of the student body, I just think that they have already indicated in service, that they're very confortable at this institution. And I think feeling comfortable at this institution, and seeing the diversity that exists in the administration and in the faculty, I think that's a factor in terms of how they see themselves and how they begin to interact with each other. So I think that has been a factor, in them seeing themselves and discovering their humanity at the same way they might be identifying with their nationality. I don't get a sense that people are isolated based upon their nationality, but they see themselves as being part of a large institution.

Jerry: Are there other issues with the students that you'd like to take up now, or should we move on to another topic?

Basil: The thing that I want to mention was the dialogue that takes place within the institution, because I think that also helps the students in many respects. We have become a truly democratic institution, at least I like to think that. You can always improve, you can always get better at that. I think the Town Hall Meetings have been institutionalized. They might not be attended by great numbers of students each time there's a Town Hall Meeting, but I think there's culture at the college that is aware that if you have a burning issue, you can go to the Town Hall Meeting and raise it with faculty members, with administrators, in a very civil manner, and that there's a discourse that takes place that is beneficial to all. I think that the College

Council has played a role in all this. I think the Faculty Senate in its interaction with university officials, as well as with administrators, keep a dialogue going. I think the Comprehensive Planning Committee, which brings all the different entities and components of the college together. The President's Cabinet, which is also very diverse, encompassing of the entire college. The ongoing meetings that take place between faculty and administrators, the ongoing meetings that take place between students and administrators. I just think it helps to create a very healthy environment, it breaks down the distrust that can easily set in, and we're able to reason, on an ongoing basis. I think we've found a way to institutionalize reasoning, and so, we do that and we do it effectively. I've been, for example, meeting with departments of both Writing Across the Curriculum, and I've had very productive meetings with the department of psychology, with music and philosophy, and with the history department. I mean, there might be differences that will come up, but at least we have an opportunity to exchange ideas and to reason together, and I think that is what an institution of higher learning is really all about.

Jerry: You sort of made the transition into issues of faculty administration concerns, and I guess one of the classic conflicts in any college is between faculty and administration. I don't think there's a college in the world that does not have these kinds of issues arise. How have you seen them played out at the college, both before you became Provost and after you become Provost?

Basil: Well, I think that conflict is healthy and a certain amount of tension can be productive. I think that at John Jay, even long before I became Provost of the college, that there was always, to return to what I said earlier, a core faculty who are very much interested in matters of higher education, very much interested in standards, in the capabilities of our students, as well as in budgetary matters, the business of fairness at the college, when it comes to personnel and budget issues. So that always there, I mean long before I became Provost, I had served on the personnel and budget committee and that was also a body that was very democratic. We have the tradition here that even though the president makes all personnel decisions, the president has always taken very seriously the recommendation that he has received from the person in budget committee, and so I think that was an example of the democratic spirit of the college, where faculty was able to exercise its influence over personnel matters. I think that in the '90s, this decade of the '90s, I think we've seen a Faculty Senate that has certainly come of age. And a Faculty Senate that has become an essential actor in the life of the college. Certain members of the Faculty Senate are members of the College Council, and so therefore anytime issues of substance come to the College Council, you see that faculty members play an important role in that discussion. What I think is that we've seen a falling off of in recent years is the participation of students in the College Council. In the early '90s they played a very important role in the College Council. They've become not as visible and not as, attendance rate of the student government at the College Council has in fact, tapered off in recent years. But I think that there are other ways in which this relationship between faculty and administrators has in fact been enriched. I think it's not just through the committee structure. I think what has been, I think

helpful to the college is a continuity of many of the players. I think most of the influentials know each other and trust each other. I think that trust is indispensable to the effective running of a college, and I think once that trust breaks down then things become terribly difficult to build that consensus which we said is essential to the running of the college. So I think that the mere fact that there's this accessibility, I think we know our college, in which members of the Faculty Senate have accessibility to the President, to the Provost office, to the Vice President of Student Development. The fact that there are constant meetings of this kind, whenever there is a serious issue we call a meeting of the P and B [Personnel and Budget] and discuss these kinds of matters. I think that has helped to make certain that there aren't issues that boil over, and whenever there are issues we can really iron them all. I think a classical example of that is how we went about changing out admissions requirements to the college, which took effect in the spring of 1999. That was a discussion that started out with people wanting to abolish the associates degree program, which would have made us a very inaccessible college. But we also recognized that we were admitting students who were not performing very well and that we used empirical data to determine what really should be our cut-off scores. And we reasoned it out, we had the Town Hall Meetings, we discussed it in the Curriculum Committee, in the Faculty Senate, in the Council of Chairs, in the College Council, and we finally arrived at a consensus, which almost every person who took part in the debate at the college could support. It wasn't a discussion that left us polarized, or in a state of descensus. We came together as an institution and agreed as to what was beneficial to the college.

[0:37:41]

Jerry: That was one of the issues that I was going to ask you about so I'm glad you talked about that. Could we talk about Gurabo? Because my sense is that Gurabo there wasn't as much of a consensus that developed initially. I think over time a consensus developed, but initially I think that there was more divisiveness over that.

Basil: I think the faculty, at least certain members of the faculty, were apprehensive as to whether we could run a college in Gurabo using the medium of Spanish as a teaching language and still devote sufficient energies to achieving excellence at John Jay of Criminal Justice. I think there were genuine feelings. People were really concerned about that. And I also thought that the differences that surface as an outgrowth of Gurabo were in the long-term interest of the college. Because what Gurabo did, once we decided to move ahead with Gurabo is that the travelling to Gurabo, where people were interacting with each other outside of the college, brought about a high degree of bonding among faculty and administrators. And I thought that seeing ourselves from a distance enabled us to develop a greater appreciation of our capabilities. I think one of the things that afflicted us in the early '90s and maybe in the '80s, is that we didn't really have much confidence in ourselves. And one of the things that I think Gurabo contributed to is a sense of confidence and how we can go about achieving excellence. Because we went into

Gurabo, we setup a first class program and we graduated students. About 95% of the student body graduated from Gurabo, and that was not an easy task. To go down there, recruit faculty, adhere to a curriculum similar to what existed on this campus, having chair persons from here overseeing that program. I mean, it meant much more work than were doing heretofore, but we did it and I think that the Gurabo experience in conjunction with some other experiences '90s, had given us the confidence, and I think led to a certain maturation where we don't really suffer as much as we did prior to this from an inferiority complex as an institution.

Jerry: What else do you think gave us that confidence?

Basil: Well, I think the growth of the graduate programs, the PhD program in Criminal Justice, and becoming number one in criminal justice policy in the U.S. News & World Report. And the kind of acknowledgement that some of our faculty members has received in recent years, I think has given us a new confidence. I think we realize we have a faculty that can compete with any faculty in the world. I think also realization that the reputation of the college, nationally, that many of us were not even aware that we had that reputation. We were so busy doing out day-to-day work that we didn't have the opportunity to step back and to reflect as to what the college had achieved and the contributions that the college had made to the professionalization of criminal justice practitioners. I think it is that kind of realization that made us realize that we were not mediocre. That even though we were an open enrollment institution, we had produced some outstanding students, at least many outstanding students, and that we had a rigorous curriculum, and had a reputation outside that we could all feel very proud of.

I think one other factor, which we shouldn't forget, I think acquiring this building also added to our confidence. It meant an investment in the college, by the city, by the state. And these facilities were really facilities of a college, you know, appropriate for a college. And I think once we get phase two going that is going to build further confidence since we will not only become a contiguous institution in terms of our physical facilities, but then we will have many things which are of the top of the line, whether it's going to be computer facilities, forensic science labs, and other kinds of activities that, you know, make people really feel good about themselves. And I think there's a question that physical facilities can do that.

Jerry: Of course, one of the things that John Jay has complained about over the years has been that we have been treated as a kind of step child by the administration of the City University, and that specifically out funding has not been up to what the other colleges have received.

Basil: The President, President Lynch and myself went to 80th street on Wednesday, to meet with Vice Chancellor Louise Mirrer about our enrollment plans and that issue came up. And what I think is that whenever that issue comes up now, at 80th street, that they immediately mention that they've never been able to hold up a meeting with John Jay college officials, faculty or administrators, without that topic

coming up. So it's clear that we sent a message to 80th street, and I think this is also another example of the working relationship between faculty and administrators. That we really were able to send a very clear message to 80th street, doing research, documenting the inequity, I think people like Tom Litwack, Karen Kaplowitz**,** Ned Benton and others just did some marvelous work in that area. You also have to include Bob Sermier. Sermier was just outstanding in that. We really made that known to the powers that be up at 80th street, and I don't think there's anybody at 80th street that is not familiar with that sort of disadvantaged position that we presently continue to be and even though we got $2.8 million from 80th street, which was put into our base budget for this academic year.

[0:46:46]

Jerry: How have you seen that fight develop over the years? It's certainly been going on for many years at the college. Do you see the Faculty Senate having played a role?

Basil: Oh the Faculty Senate played an outstanding role. The Council of Chairs played an outstanding role. The budget committee played a great role, I mean the business office, you know, Bob Sermier also was the one who was very much aware of it, and was able to give us a lot of documentary evidence showing this inequity. Gerry Lynch certainly played his role in making that known to 80th street. I mean, I think we all…There's an old movie called, *All The Brothers Were Valiant*. I think, what's his name, Richard Perdum, I think starred in it. Anyhow, I mean, you know, I think all the brothers were valiant and all the sisters were virtuous in dealing with. This shows again the maturation of the college. It shows the engaged nature of the faculty, it shows the concern of an administration, it shows accessibility, it shows the fact that we have become politically sophisticated, we know how to mobilize elements within out own ranks, we know to send the message to 80th street, and I think that has a lot to do with the leadership capabilities about the faculty and administration.

Jerry: When you came into office as the Provost, you determined to create a culture of research, and teaching, and scholarship at the college. Of course there was always research, and scholarship and teaching going on, but what were you trying to achieve when you became Provost?

Basil: Let me tell you what I've always been concerned with long before I became a Provost. I think there's a danger in institutions of higher learning to become so preoccupied with minutia and become so taken up with the bureaucratic labyrinth of higher education, that scholarship gets stifled. And you know, sometimes when you listen to the discourse that takes place up at 80th street, and even here, it's almost as if scholarship is irrelevant. The fundamental reason for the existence of a college for 80th street, for the City University, is scholarship, that goes on in the classroom, and scholarship that goes on outside the classroom. And what happens is that bureaucrats are very skillful at complicating very, very simple matters, and they write language that becomes so incomprehensible that people spend years talking

about it and trying to explain it and tying to resolve it. And it's really a waste of energy and it takes us away from what an institution of higher learning is really all about.

Now there are certain mundane tasks that you must perform in an institution of higher learning, but an institution of higher learning cannot be overwhelmed by bureaucracy, and by fringe benefits, and by all the ancillary things, and forget about what the university is about. It's about teaching, it's about learning, it's about research, it's about scholarship. And so one of the things that I was trying to do is to ensure that that essence was recaptured and remained salient. And so what we've tried to do with the conferences, with the lecture series, with all the kinds of activities that take place around here, is to keep that, and to keep it up front. And I think one of the more interesting thing that has occurred at the college, is that since we started holding these international criminal justice conferences. They started, if I recall, in 1992, in St. Petersburg, Russia, that that now has also given us an opportunity to take the show on the road, but pivoting around the business of research, of scholarship, of learning. And so I just think that what I was doing is what the faculty would have wanted me to do because that's what the faculty do. At least many of the faculty, that's what they do, and it's trying to share this culture of learning and to make certain that the institution is able to support it and to give it the presence and exposure to keep the environment stimulating.

Jerry: Am I misremembering that before you became Provost, that there were very few outside speakers, who came to the college and were available to the whole college community?

Basil: There were a few I'd imagine. You know, you and I, I remember years ago brought Manning Marable to the college. I think we were able to fork over a few bucks from somewhere and brought Manning Marable I think that, I think this has a lot to do with our new confidence, our new maturation that has taken place in the world of scholarship, that major figures will come here now, to speak. Major figures who participate in international criminal justice conference. I mean, I think the last year, spring, we had about four conferences at the college. I mean, many of those conferences were under the auspices of faculty, and they were just splendidly done. You know, John Kleinig publishes *Criminal Justice Ethics*, which is a highly respected journal in its field. Mangai Natargajan put out a conference on internal drug smuggling. Bob Sullivan put out a conference on post modernism of the criminal justice system. I mean, you know, Blanche Cook and Jerry Markowitz put out a conference-

Jerry: And Basil Wilson.

Basil: And Basil Wilson, on the whole business of the prison system and education. So, I think that once you create an environment, it has a multiplier effect on others. You know, more people become engaged, more people recognize things that they are capable of doing, and so, we all benefit from the activity. It makes the place much

more exciting, and it also reduces our preoccupation with much of the bureaucratic nonsense that is a part of higher education.

Jerry: You touched on the international conferences and of course in the past ten years or so, there has been a tremendous explosion in the growth of the college's international mission. Could you talk about that?

Basil: Yes, because I thought that when the internationalizing of criminal justice was in an embryonic stage, I think there was some resistance at the college to it. Again, people saw it like Gurabo that was taking us away from the college. But I think, Ann Reynolds came to the faculty senate some years ago, and gave that international dimension legitimacy. And I think Freda Adler also came here, I think it might have been a criminal justice education conference, and also put a sort of imprimatur on international criminal justice. And I think that it dovetailed with a whole globalization that is so much a part of the latter part of the twentieth century and it certainly will be an essential part of the twenty-first century. And so we have become a college now, not just with a national reputation, but with an international reputation, a college that just recently put together a new major in international criminal justice, a college who has been hiring faculty who are experts in international criminal justice. And I think that one of the weaknesses, certainly of American Criminal Justice in its early years, is that it just simply confined to the national boundary, and what I think is that we know about scholarship, is that when we use the comparative method or the international method, we get a much better understanding, not just of American civilization, but of in terms of the issues that we are wrestling with. And I think we have in fact moved quite boldly into this new light of international criminal justice education. It's still in an early stage, it's going to be interesting to see how much the college pays attention to matters of human rights of an international nature, matters of genocide, of ethnic wars of an international nature. I think those are very important issues of international criminal justice. But I think it is very exciting. I mean, the worst thing that can happen to scholarship is for it to remain stagnant. You always need to find new angles, new dimensions, new perspectives, whether it is cultural studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, international studies. And I think it just added a new level of excitement to what we do at this institution.

[0:58:08]

Jerry: How has the Board of Trustees responded to this international mission of the college?

Basil: Oh, they have embraced it. I mean, they embraced it when they supported us in the mission to Gurabo. They embraced it in terms of many of them attending to the international criminal justice conference. They understand the importance of the internationalization of criminal justice. They had no difficulty with the new major. They were very pleased with it. Many spoke on it, I mean, they really pleased with the fact that we had become trailblazers in this respect.

Jerry: Could you talk a little bit about the increasing role of technology at the college, and especially the new praise for distance learning?

Basil: I think technology has to be seen in a multiplicity of dimensions. There's no question that a student graduating from an undergrad institution needs to have some kind of literacy in computers and to have some sense as to where computers are advancing a knowledge of software because many of the criminal justice agencies now are using computer software, so that's important. We recently established a lab on crime-mapping, so that our students, whether they were doing policing, or criminal justice, or deviant behavior, would have the kind of familiarity with software and with technology. We now have this course info software that faculty can use to enrich their course offerings. See, I think technology has to be seen certainly in the dimension of how technology can be used to make learning much more comprehensible to students. So we even use graphs, we even use lecture notes or a chat…

Jerry: Chat Rooms?

Basil: Chat rooms. On the internet, for example. That can do, and many faculty members at the college have in fact begun to do just that. There is an asynchronistic learning and there's a synchronistic learning. We have made some advances with asynchronistic learning in terms of people doing courses on the internet, and that again enables the students to develop a sophistication of working and doing a course on the computer. Most of those students are in fact already registered at John Jay College. We are doing some distance learning. The problem with distance learning is to identify a constituency that is away from the college. I think the future is going to be more, the future in terms of courses, is going to be more in the internet, the web page, rather than the distance learning. The distance learning, I think, is going to be helpful in terms of conferencing, and maybe giving special lectures, and what have you. So, I think that is certainly the future and we have to make certain that we're not left in the past. But it certainly isn't going to replace the classroom, and there's a certain richness that you get from the classroom, from the interaction between faculty and teaching that you're not really going to get from asynchronistic learning, at all. But we have really proliferated the labs in recent years, thanks to the tier grant and the support that we have gotten from 80th street. And now we have the Department of Information Technology that has instrumental in putting together a new email, setting up servers to expand our capacity to do a certain kind of technological activities. It certainly has enriched the learning process and it certainly has facilitated communication. Many people only get information on email. They don't write anything, they don't telephone, they send your things email. So there's a certain fetishness to it but you know, it is something that we have to integrate into the whole teaching and learning process, and if we're going to do that, I don't think, I don't know whether there's going to be a huge army of people waiting to do this outside of the college. I mean, we just have to see how that market develops. If there is a market then I think we have to make certain that we have the

wherewithal to seize those advantages and to have enrolled and expand our student population through it.

Jerry: Have you embraced email?

Basil: I've sent email. I mean, the first email I sent, I sent it to my grandson, and one of the problem was is that he never got it. I find that it certainly is an inexpensive way to communicate. I mean, the only concern that I have is that there's so much rubbish that is printed on the email, and sometimes to go through all of it is so time consuming. What really fascinates me about the new technology, and I think it enriches the learning process, is the PC has now become a library. That you can download information, that you can find information, that you can really, a student can learn a great deal from the internet and that, in a sense, that becomes a liberating force. Everybody hasn't got to cram into a library. Not that the library has become obsolete, but it's now another tool that can be used to give people access to information, but I think they have to be very careful. Information is not knowledge. You got to find ways to convert information into knowledge, and that's what the university does, you know, in terms of courses, in terms of tests, in terms of activities. Am I back on camera sir?

[1:05:49]

Jerry: You are back on camera. As handsome as ever. Is there a way of turning on these lights? It's saying that we're…Provost Wilson, we've talked around the curriculum of the college a lot today. Maybe you can talk more directly about the development of the curriculum and especially about writing.

Basil: I think one of the things that is remarkable about the curriculum is that during the 90s, maybe in the 70s, late 60s, when there were many colleges that were abandoning the general education requirements, John Jay was wise enough not to abandon general education requirements. There was a very strong feeling, which I guess is part of the legacy of Don Riddle that the best way to educate cops is to educating them like how you were educating everybody else, and so therefore we have this general education requirements that encompasses the humanities, foreign languages, ethnic studies, English, etc., which gives people a rounded education. I mean, it gives them certainly breadth. One of the things that we have not found a way to do is to have breadth and concomitantly have depth. We just have not found a way to do that. But I think one of the things that we have seen in the majors, is how the majors have adapted to the changing nature of the criminal justice field. A lot of the majors now have included computer applications courses. A number of them include research methods, and so therefore students then are developing logical as well as quantitative skills to go with the modern world.

We have always, as a college, been committed to writing across the curriculum. We adopted writing adopted across the curriculum to the 1980s, and the college has a gem that it not often shows to the world and that it the Thematic Studies

department, which has always been our writing intensive studies department that is interdisciplinary and uses the theme approach, and that department which I might teach at any one time, 7 to 8% of the college student body has always had that commitment to writing intensive courses. But we were never able to afford, on a college-wide basis, writing intensive courses. I remember discussions taking place at the college whenever we had economic crunch. Why don't we close Thematic Studies? Thematic Studies is too expensive a program, we don't need it. But it's really one of the jewels of the institution. It attracts many of the best and brightest students and it is also a place where many of our faculty are resuscitated and reenergized and really get a new lease on life by teaching with other faculty members and really developing a sort great esprit de corps. And we have been concerned for the last couple of years as to what extent have we have been adhering to the principal of writing across the curriculum. In recent years because of the budgetary problems, they've had to increase class size and once we increase class size, I certainly think it serves as a disincentive for writing across the curriculum and both Larry Kobilinsky and myself have been looking at course outlines to see, are our faculty adhering to the commitment of the 1980s which was adopted then, by the curriculum committee and the college council committee to writing across curriculum.

Just recently, this January, January 1999, the board has committed the City University to writing across the curriculum and a discussion I had recently with one of the deans of academic affairs, he has argued that, one of the criticisms that he has heard of students graduating from the City University is that they have poor writing skills. And that is not just an issue in the City University, I mean, we have some evidence of out Graduate Programs with people coming in from pretty distinguished institutions, with high grade point averages, have very mediocre, if not less than mediocre writing skills. So, with the university making money available for writing across the curriculum, we sent a proposal on December the 10th, and this is something that we have established, it will be announced in another couple weeks, a writing across the curriculum committee, which will be monitoring our commitment to writing across the curriculum. But what we really want to do, is to increase the numbers of writing intensive courses that every John Jay College student must take before they graduate, which will enhance their writing skills and ensure that when the graduate from the institution, that they have some proficiency in writing. And we want to set it up in such a way that we give our students the experience and backgrounds to prepare them for the proficiency exam which takes affect in 2000, prior to accumulating 60 credits. So we presently have 2 courses, English 101, and 102, where there's writing intensive courses, and both the literature course, the two literature courses which all students must take, there's a certain amount of writing that is done, and is also in other courses, where there is some adherence to writing across the curriculum. But we want to take, at least 2 to 3, off the core courses, reduce the class sizes in that core, which would facilitate a greater degree of interaction between the faculty and the student, and to make those courses into writing intensive courses. We've made some suggestions. We have suggested one of the literature courses, maybe one of the history courses, the history is somewhat

skeptical of that, and then philosophy, which has embraced it quite enthusiastically since they do a lot of writing in philosophy. Maybe if it's not history, it could be ethics studies 123, 124, and 125.
And then what we want to do, is to link the writing across the curriculum initiative in the early stages of a student's development to the majors, where we have 400 level courses and that we will select another course in the major which will become a writing intensive course. So there's approximately then, 7 writing intensive courses that everyone attending the college will have an opportunity to take in order to improve their writing skills. And the other thing that we want to do so that the writing across the curriculum is not born exclusively by people teaching writing intensive courses, is that we would issue on a regular basis opportunities through an RFP [Request for Proposals] for other faculty, to teach their courses as writing intensive courses and so if you get them a certain amount of enthusiasm and a ethos at the college, a commitment to writing, which would help in terms of the retention of students as well as deepening the learning experience of our students and improving their skills. So I think this is a gallant opportunity, which we hope to begin on a grand scale in 2000. This year, we began with writing fellows, and we had 10 sections of courses, in which we would assign writing fellows to those courses that'd be responsible for 2 sections working with faculty members, and I think it has worked very well, and at a minimum indicated that at least in 30 percent of students, they could see some improvement in their writing. So this is a new initiative on the part of the university, which the college is adopting and something that I think that we can all support, largely because the students graduating from the college, I think, with this kind of exposure, with this kind of writing intensive courses, will be better trained and better educated.

[1:15:47]

Jerry: How do you see your role as the Provost of the college?

Basil: I think the Provost has to try to establish an ethos that convinces the rest of the institution that the college is about academic affairs. That what is preeminent in the college is what takes place in the classroom, and what takes place in the world of scholarship, as we create it, and the other parts of the college, really serve…are here to enrich what the students do and what the faculty do. And I think we've always been able to do that budgetary wise, that the academic salary of the college is sacrosanct budgetary wise, and that everything else has to recognize that's what constitutes the essence of the college. I think it is a responsibility of the Provost to ensure that the faculty feel that I can represent them and I can represent them effectively at 80th street and in the different forums that I have to represent them throughout the university. And the faculty must have access to me in such a way that I can learn from them. This is not a job in which I have a monopoly of wisdom. I have to learn from faculty on an ongoing basis, both the senior faculty and the junior faculty, so that it can help me to frame things in such a way that can strengthen the institution. And so therefore there's that interactive relationship that has to exist between the Provost and the entire faculty. I try to make myself accessible, not just

the chairs, not just the senior faculty, but to the entire faculty body. I think the Provost along with the deans and with the senior professors must be able to create an ethos so that scholarship can thrive, so that we can support each other, we can have these exchanges on an ongoing basis, and feel as if we are in a college in such a way that we can communicate with each other, and create a sense of community. I think that is indispensible for achieving our objectives. And I think it is my responsibility to find new ways of doing things and finding new initiatives every academic year on an ongoing basis. I think it is my responsibility not to have the institution go stale. I have to find ways to rejuvenate, to refresh, to excite the institution about things. I think, for example, writing across the curriculum can do that. I think the conferences we have been having can do that. I think by encouraging people to get grants, and to try to provide people with the necessary tools to do the job. We are almost at the point of the college, where every faculty member has a computer with Internet capabilities. We're just so far from being there. By the end of the Spring, we will be there. And so, I think it is my responsibility to try to get as much resources for the faculty, so that they can perform their tasks at hand.

Jerry: Could you talk about faculty development, which you have been instrumental in initiating and carrying through?

Basil: Yes, I don't think I am the one who… I'm always reluctant to take credit for these things singlehandedly, because I think that John Jay has a team spirit, and many of the things come up through meetings and one person might suggest something and we brainstorm and something comes in to be. I think one of the things that we have been doing for the last, I think 4 or 5 years, is with faculty development, and it is not only… is it a coming together of the faculty. It is a social event as well as a learning event, as a faculty development event. But I think faculty look forward to coming together and just interacting with each other. But I think what we have done with the faculty development is to take specific issues, such as critical thinking, such as writing assignments, such as research, challenges that we face.

Jerry: Technology.

Basil: Technology as we did in the last year, and to bring the faculty together, divide ourselves into workshops, come together in a very consensual way of seeing how we can use these ways to improve our teaching, be much more effective in the classroom so that we can teach our students more effectively, and in conjunction to that, strengthen the institution, and I think the faculty development has really really come through with it. The challenge is to make certain that we are constantly excited about faculty development. In fact, one of the things that we did recently, rather than doing it twice a year, we're now doing it once a year, cause we want to maintain the excitement, and rather people that it's a chore, or it's a job, or it's a routine thing, we felt that doing it once a year was really the better way to do it, so that there would be that excitement by the time it came around again.

Jerry: Where do you see John Jay going in the next 10 years?

[1:23:07]

Basil: I think that there's an interesting development taking place in our graduate program, and it's one that I think we have to have a college wide discussion on that issue. I've always thought of the City University as being an urban university, a university that is here to serve the interest of the poor, of the inner city student. That is the mission of the City University. Our graduate programs do that and they also serve the interest of criminal justice agencies and public sector agencies. But if you look at some of the programs, we now draw nationally and that's a very pleasing, and for some troubling, kind of achievement. I think that it's tremendous and gratifying to know that we have this national reputation and we can attract 400 applications from some of the best institutions in the country, but we also have to be careful that we're not closing up the people who we were established to serve, so we have to develop some balance on that, and if you look at our graduate programs, they have become very very stringent in terms of who they admit, and we do an exceptional job in our graduate, in our 5 graduate programs, and there's been a tremendous growth in our graduate programs in recent years and I think we will continue to see that growth.

For the future, I see where the writing across the curriculum can really infuse a certain... at least [in] the early years ahead, I mean at least another 5 years, to ensure that our outcomes assessment is achieving what we really want to achieve In the sense that, we want to make certain that the students who graduate from the college have certain competences: that they are literate, they can compute, they can do research, they can write clearly, they can think clearly, they're sophisticated enough that they can go on to graduate school and compete wherever they choose to go. And I think that, they gotta find a way, not just to think we're doing that, but to be able to prove that empirically, and so, we have this outcomes assessment on teams that we have set up, and we have integrated it with the writing across the curriculum, and we're about now to develop a portfolio and to make certain that in our capstone courses that faculty are accurately measuring those competences, and so we have a data taking place among faculty. And so, what are the competences that we wish to measure and how do we go about measuring them? And I think that is going to take much of our time in the coming years.

I think the other issues that we have recognized in the future is that we really want to create and establish ourselves as a serious research institution. That's one of the reason why we started to bring on board distinguished professors and not just, especially in the field of Criminal Justice, that we can begin putting out seminal works and so therefore we become not just the largest Criminal Justice College but one where the finest research is actually taking place. The thing that I see also developing for the future is ongoing working relationships with other international institutions, with other international colleges, that share our Criminal Justice interest. We need to have more visiting professors coming to the college. We need to

get more John Jay College professors interested in the coming visiting professors elsewhere. So, in the same way that we were able to overcome out parochialism in looking at Criminal Justice and embrace the international Criminal Justice mission, we need our faculty to embrace that and willing to spend time in institutions abroad where they can bring back that experience, that body of knowledge, that they would have picked up while studying in another country and teaching in another country. I see that as being very very important for the future.

And I think for the future also, it becomes important for us to recognize what is it that works at the college and to ensure that we continue doing it and that is the open dialogue, the cooperation taking place between all the essential entities of the college, and ensuring that there continues to be a commitment to our students. I mean, those are things that even if you have them now, you can lose them in a year or two, or you can get sidetracked, you can get derailed from those essential parts at any time. So essentially that's what I see for the future. The only other thing that I mentioned, which I think is critical, I think that if higher education in the city is going to achieve excellence it's gotta be in a much more equitable manner and a far more generous way. I think that an open enrollment college should not have to have the class sizes that we presently possess. That we should be able to be funded at such a level, that we can reduce class size, ensure the connection linking faculty to student, and to reduce the dependency on adjuncts. The university said that they're committed to having 70% of courses taught by full time faculty. I think that is essential for retention, that is essential for the learning process, and I think that could also open jobs for a new generation of faculty coming; but I think that is something that can only be achieved if the board of trustees and the governor and the mayor recognize the importance of higher education to the economy in this city, and I haven't seen that. I just haven't seen that recognition. They really think you can build greatness on a pittance. You can't.

[01:31:21]