

INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT H. BOWKER 9-25-86 by Julius C.C. Edelstein

NOTE: EXCESSIVE ECHO

JE: These are notes on a conversation with Bowker. The question whether CUNY is today a university or a system, whether it was intended to be a university, and whether the people who are now part of the university wanted to be it, and what the public expected. It's a university, while its functions were of course immensely strengthened by you through the graduate center, and other accretions and definitions on the part of the chancellor. But there's a strong feeling by some of the presidents that...and by some that it's not a university but should be, and by some that it's not a university and should not be. What were your thoughts in the early days?

AB: Well, I don't know really. Why don't you talk about what the question means a minute?

JE: Well, the university in the classically...in the usual definition of it, central planning as well as budgeting.

AB: Well, I guess I may not...a university is usually characterized by graduate work, professional work, research activities, and so forth. The community colleges are not what is ever thought of generally as a university, so that to some extent the City University has to be regarded as a system, it seems to me. Of course, they weren't really presentable to the City University in those years. Actually, that's kind of hard to know. Is Berkeley a university or not?

JE: Berkeley is a university, yes.

AB: Well, that may be. Is the University of California a university?

JE: No, it's a system.

AB: A system of universities.

JE: That's right. Well, you don't have to go that far. SUNY is a system.

AB: Yes.

JE: And each one gets its budget separately, and each one is individually accountable, and there's very little, a minimum of central planning.

AB: I don't know that there's more or less than we have. Do you really think so?

JE: I mean, it's in large measure the planning was done by the budget, the State Budget Bureau, but it certainly is...

AB: It drove us, too.

JE: I mean, it's a question, it's resolved itself into such questions as does the central office have the power to reallocate budgets?

AB: Yes, of course it has that.

JE: Well, that's a university.

AB: But it had more than at one time. Now CUNY is supposed to have that with the new flexibility.

JE: Yes. I don't know whether they...

AB: I mean, I really guess I'd like to know what presidents who are for and against it have in mind.

JE: I mean...

AB: I think it would be a mistake, a serious mistake to decentralize graduate instruction any further.

JE: Yes.

AB: And there is of course still talk about that.

JE: Yes, I think that's one of the things...

AB: Larry himself is not absolutely convinced that the new deal...I haven't mentioned this to anybody.

JE: No, this is just for my book.

AB: What?

JE: This is just for my book. Who thinks it maybe should be decentralized, graduate work, further.

AB: Larry...

JE: Museola, the deputy.

AB: Museola. That's the Brooklyn point of view, that's what Hess thinks.

JE: CUNY has been able to enter the ranks of recognized serious universities, even more in some ways than SUNY, because of the graduate center (inaudible) one of the people who who was heavily involved with Ben Gurion University, his name is Gelber, who has among other things was sort of chief academic officer under Johnny Toe at Stonybrook for a long time, also was on the review, middle states review of the University of Maryland at Baltimore, last spring. So when I talked to him, it took us

quite a while to get around to Ben Gurion, because these other topics were more interesting, but anyway...

AB: Of course, of course.

JE: Anyway, you know, he really thinks a graduate center puts the City University...he was saying what a genius I was, which of course I always love to hear, but the graduate center gives some respect to it...

AB: True.

JE: The graduate center really put the City University right in the core of major (inaudible) in this country, and made out of in some senses what appeared to be nothing, and that's really quite an accomplishment, and it did a lot better than I thought it would. And I think in that sense, I think now...the question then is whether the graduate school graduate center is an integral part of the central office or whether it's up and running as a separate institution, and I guess in some ways I thought it would be stronger in the future if it had some type of identity, which is why I made (inaudible) college president, and that institutionalized it better. On the other hand, it does appear that it still has to be regarded as kind of a special pet of the central administration. Joe would say it is still getting kind of preferential treatment.

AB: What?

JE: Well, if it does.

AB: Yes.

JE: It was line allocations and every other thing.

AB: Yes.

JE: But now, for instance, if obviously the people who most strongly think that it ought to be a system and treat it as a system are Shalela and Hess, and...not to some extent, to a major extent by Siegel, then the institutions that have gotten some recognition and they would like to have more graduate work and also independent political action to secure their budgets. But at Hunter, along with the graduate school, they've got the best students. But that would be at the expense of the others.

AB: Yes, and I think the main reason for existence is to put away an in between...I mean, the main reason for existence is really not to have people go independently politically, but to have all the institutions go together. So recognition is...I mean, that's what a system is for, not a university

JE: I think they would like to be university centers.

AB: Well, it seems to me that the university center concept in New York is just so-so, that in a way it hasn't produced. I mean, it's true

that Stoneybrook and Buffalo both have some elements of distinction, but neither one is a major university center in the sense that...

JE: Stands further.

AB: Well, it wouldn't even be in the top 20 or even...they're stronger in science in CUNY, in a way a little different, but CUNY on the whole is a better graduate school. Unless you say science is the only thing that matters, which is of course true.

JE: Naturally you would say that. But you're not supposed to say that, so...but well, I mean I think there's also the fact that it protects places like Lehman and York and other places that have problems, having either a system or a university, that it is the concern of the central office that these others...and certainly that would be the...if there were a public policy on it, that would be the public policy.

AB: Sure. But I think both the system and the university concept kind of protect them. The doctoral programs that are delegated to the colleges, which are obvious ones I suppose...

JE: There are 2-3.

AB: What?

JE: Public administration at John Jay...

AB: Yes, it's pretty mediocre so far, no distinction.

JE: Civics at City.

AB: Well, that's really true there too. I mean, there isn't any evidence where they'll say they don't have the money, resources, and so forth. In order to really do one of those things well, I'm not sure they can do any better at City. I don't know, but so far nobody's really...what Donna wants to do, I really...she really wants to start a whole lot of professional programs. She herself comes out of Maxwell School, which I think is probably not as important as it was once.

JE: Yes, that's the general perception.

AB: And in general probably in the end it will yield to the leadership of the policy oriented schools, although it hasn't happened yet. And like the Kennedy School and the Berkeley School and the Maryland School, for that matter, and she wants to get into big MPAs and education degrees and so forth, and that's all mildly useful. Mildly, but certainly no quality, no distinction. You never heard of a school being famous because it gives an MPA. Really, I mean, they're kind of low level things that she has in mind to do. I never really talked it through with her. I know Joe is not very keen on it, and I don't know whether Baruch is really making the most it can out of the opportunities in the business community. That would be hard to say. It certainly never did. Siegel is probably better than most people they had, although I don't know.

JE: They haven't had many. And the ones they did have were not very good. Well, that's a good thoughtful discussion of the subject. I think that you make a good point which I haven't really focused on. It depends on what you mean and from what angle you come at the question. Those who most strenuously advocated being a system means what they really want is a virtual, free-standing independence.

AB: Yes. But a strong system wouldn't give them that. Maybe SUNY is kind of a weak system.

JE: It is.

AB: But I'll tell you that every time we got caught operating politically independently at the University of California, we had our asses whipped. Of course, we all did it, but we didn't always get caught.

JE: It all depends on how strong the California system is.

AB: Transfer.

JE: And that's true here, too. I mean, Shalela gets labeled a lot, but if there were another chancellor and if she weren't she...

AB: Last time I talked to her about it, which may be a year or so ago, she said that she wouldn't mind being more a member of the team in terms of Albany, but she never really knew what the chancellor was up to.

JE: Well, that's what she said to me in my interview with her recently, exactly what she said, almost in the same words. (inaudible) remember her words.

AB: Yes, but I haven't really dug into it.

JE: You see, the way it affects me is when I talk about the City University and have to look at changes that have taken place there, I have some idea what the terms meant.

AB: You know my famous statement about long range planning, it's easier to take a step in the right direction than to set long range goals on where you're going.

JE: I remember the famous story of the California press.

AB: What was that about?

JE: Whenever they couldn't make a decision, then the board of the California press, of which you were a member, you would say, now, let's see how this relates to our long range goals. That's the end of that.

AB: Well, anyway, so that I suppose it would be fair to say that I never put a lot of emphasis on a sharp definition of the difference between the two, but on the whole, SUNY is regarded as a system by the

academic community. But that would not preclude it having more than one university, serious university center, but it would not be wise to have any duplication of graduate work.

JE: (inaudible)

AB: What?

JE: In this period.

AB: In this period, in this city, and there was a competition with the privates, and in a way it's remarkable that they've been able to hold their own with what they have.

JE: Well, I think that there's a public policy, at least up in Albany, that it should be more centrally accountable and controlled.

AB: Well, there's something to that I suppose.

JE: Okay, thank you very much for your time and thoughts and disposition. See you later.