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Interview with Jack Rossmann, Professor of Psychology

Jack Rossmann

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Oral History Project

Interview with: **Jack Rossmann**
Professor of Psychology, 1964-2007; Office of Educational Research
1964-1975; Vice-President for Academic Affairs, 1978-1986

Date: **Wednesday, May 23rd, 2007, 1:00 p.m.**

Place: Macalester College Olin-Rice Science Center, Psychology Department
Interviewer: Laura Zeccardi, Class of 2007

Edited interview run time: 1:02:57 minutes

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Agreement: Signed, on file, no restrictions

Subjects:

	Background before Macalester
00:33	Educational background
00:56	How came to Macalester
01:37	Starting as professor and Director of Educational Research
02:00	Previous knowledge of Macalester
02:24	Initial impression
03:01	Previous teaching experience
03:19	First years on campus, teaching and campus climate
05:42	Changes in the late 1960s
08:34	Changes in student-faculty and student-administration interactions
10:14	Work in Office of Educational Research
12:26	Impact of work of Office of Educational Research
13:27	Issues addresses by OER: retention, department reviews
15:22	Mac's emphasis on educational research
17:22	Teaching in the Psychology Department American Council on Education Fellow
20:03	Courses taught
22:48	Teaching versus administration

23:57	Time as Vice-President of Academic Affairs
26:38	Issues dealt with as Vice-President of Academic Affairs
28:57	Interim
30:47	Involvement with students and faculty as VP of Academic Affairs
31:28	Main faculty concerns
32:38	Student issues and activism late 1970s/early '80s
33:57	Return to faculty teaching position
35:13	Working with President John Davis
37:32	Transition back to teaching from administration
38:19	Change in teaching style, impact of time in Education Research and as VP
39:13	Time and experience as Chair of the Psychology Department
40:22	Personal research and publication
42:56	Collaborating with students
43:09	Tenure process
44:25	Involvement with Athletics
48:02	New MARC, Macalester Athletic and Recreation Center
48:43	Experience in 3 different areas: teaching, administration, research
49:27	2006 Self-Study Committee and changes at Macalester
52:09	Changes in faculty teaching styles
53:09	Personal teaching style
54:00	Student issues and activism
54:47	Changes in student life and involvement in organizations
55:45	Political climate on campus
57:37	Macalester's growing reputation and impact on college and students
58:39	Student-faculty and student-administration relationships
59:54	Involvement with college today
1:00:27	Presence/involvement of retired faculty on campus
1:01:05	Favorite memories: becoming VP for Academic Affairs, awarding son his diploma
1:02:16	Looking forward to new MARC and remodeled Fine Arts complex

Interview with Jack Rossmann

Laura Zeccardi, Interviewer

**May 23, 2007
Macalester College
Olin-Rice Science Center
Psychology Department**

LZ: My name is Laura Zeccardi and I'm a new graduate of Macalester College conducting interviews for the Macalester Oral History Project. Today is May 23rd, 2007 and I am interviewing Jack Rossmann, Professor of Psychology in Olin-Rice. So first if you could just state your name, and where you were born, and how old you were when you first came to Macalester.

JR: My name is Jack Rossmann. I was born in Walnut, Iowa—not too far from Omaha, Nebraska—west-central Iowa, and came to Macalester in 1964 when I was 27.

[00:33]

LZ: What is your educational background, and what had you been doing prior to coming to Macalester?

JR: I went to Iowa State University as an undergraduate, stayed on there for a Master's degree, came up to the University of Minnesota to do a Ph.D. in educational psychology, and then came to Macalester shortly after finishing my Ph.D.

[00:56]

LZ: Where did the initial—were you approached by Macalester or had you pursued them in kind seeking out this...the role of being professor?

JR: Well, the good old boy network was alive and well at that time. So Macalester had gotten a grant from a local foundation to hire someone to be in charge of research on that project for two years. So the Chair of the Psychology Department at Macalester at that time got in touch with a man who was one of my mentors at the University of Minnesota, saying, “Do you know of anybody who might be a good applicant for this particular position?” And that was how I learned about the job and about Macalester.

[01:37]

LZ: And you started first as both a professor and then the Director of Educational Research?

JR: Yes, my title in those first...two or three years, was Coordinator of Educational Research and Assistant Professor of Psychology. Most of my time was devoted to research, but I occasionally taught one course a year in the Psychology Department.

[02:00]

LZ: Had you had any previous experience at Macalester, any background knowledge about the school?

JR: Very little. I had, as I had mentioned, gone through public higher education. I had heard of

Macalester because my Ph.D. thesis advisor was on the Board of Trustees at Macalester at that time. So I had at least heard the name, but knew very little about the college before I came here.

[02:24]

LZ: What was your initial kind of impression of the students and the faculty and the college in general?

JR: Well, very positive. This was a brand new experience for me. Certainly Iowa State was much more applied-agriculture, engineering, home economics, that sort of thing. I got only a little taste of the liberal arts while I was at Iowa State, but not very much. So to have a college focused primarily on the liberal arts was a big shift in my view of the world of higher education. But it very quickly became a very positive view.

[03:01]

LZ: Had you had any previous teaching experience in the realm of the college world beyond obviously your own education.

JR: I taught one or two courses at the University of Minnesota while I was in graduate school, while I was finishing my Ph.D.

[03:19]

LZ: If you could just kind of describe the kind of the climate of the first couple of years you were at Macalester, and kind of what that was like for you as a relatively new professor in the

college.

JR: Okay. My early impressions were of some first-rate faculty members. Part of my position at that time was to work closely with a core group of faculty that were participating in the research project. They were just wonderful mentors for me, and helped me understand a good bit more about Macalester and about the students. And then I began working with the students more closely, again because of the research project. I think it wasn't until the third year I was here that I actually taught a course at Macalester. So that was when I first had a chance to see Macalester students in action in the classroom. And that was a great experience as well.

Those were very good times for Macalester. Prior to the 1960s, I think the general perception, public perception, of Macalester was that it was a good regional liberal arts college. The vast majority of the students were from Minnesota, and a majority of those students didn't graduate. The first year or two I was here, we did a study of student retention. And I think thirty seven percent of the students who had entered as first year students graduated from Macalester within four or five years. So, a lot of students coming to Macalester saw it as a place to do their liberal arts, and then go to the University of Minnesota or someplace else to get on with the rest of their lives.

The nature of Macalester was changing because some of the early Reader's Digest money was beginning to come to Macalester. The Board and the President at that time, Harvey Rice, began to perceive Macalester as more of a national liberal arts college. That was when we began recruiting a lot of Merit Scholars from across the country. So for those of us who came to Macalester from 1963 to 1967 or 1968, the general image was onward and upward. We're going to become an even greater institution than we were at that time. Those were very heady times.

[05:42]

LZ: How did the events such as the protests of Vietnam and the EEO program was during that time, how did that affect kind of this trend of moving upwards on the national level.

JR: Well, I'd like to go back a little bit and put Rossmann in context. The third year I was here, which would have been '66/'67, I was offered a job at the University of California, Berkeley. I went in and talked with Lu Garvin who then was the Academic Dean. And he said, "Well, okay, you ought to go try that out, but if you'd like to, we'll give you a leave of absence from Macalester in case you decide to return." So that's what I did.

During that year, Harvey Rice, who had been President, announced his decision to retire, and a man named Arthur Flemming came to Macalester as President in the Fall of '68. Flemming had been Secretary of Health, Education, Welfare in the Eisenhower Administration, had then gone to the University of Oregon as President before coming to Macalester. He was at that time, the...President or Chair of the National Council of Churches. He was a very highly visible person. He came to Macalester with an agenda committed to diversity and to a whole host of other important social issues. So, by early in that year, '68/'69, it was clear that Macalester was going to become a somewhat different place from what it had been.

I came back from that year at Berkeley thinking what a conservative place Macalester is. Then I realized that Macalester hasn't changed, it's my perception of it that has changed. But very quickly by the end of that year '68/'69, we were very much involved in the student issues of the time. [A] whole series of things happened then, '68/'69, '69/'70, until the Fall of '70, in which all kinds of parietal rules were loosened. We were one of the first colleges in the country to have

co-ed dorms. That was seen as a very radical move at that time. Much of the curriculum was loosened as well. There used to be requirements in religion, and there was a requirement for something called chapel or confrontation. A whole host of things of that sort were modified. So the times were changing, not just at Macalester, but around the country and higher education as well, and we were very much a part of that change.

[08:34]

LZ: Did those changes affect the way students interacted with the faculty or with the administration and how that kind of played out.

JR: Yes, I would say certainly the way students interacted with both faculty and administration. Interaction with faculty in the sense that—again, not all students—but a significant minority of the students who said, “Look, we know what we want, we've paid our money to come here”, and sort of, “faculty don't get in our way.” Faculty said, “Wait a minute, what's this all about?” But there came to be some really interesting experiments, such as something called Experimental College, that lasted for a couple of years. I think that would have been probably in '69, '70, '71, something like that. I don't remember the exact years. But in that case, there was a group of students who were given their own housing off campus. I mean some housing that had been owned by the college, and they then hired the faculty. There were faculty employed at Macalester, but they said “We want these folks to come be our faculty, and we'll tell them what we want them to do,” basically. So, as you perhaps would predict that experiment didn't last long. But it was a pretty significant event at the time. Some of the students were superb, and have gone on to do very interesting things. That's one of my recollections of the way the spirit of

the times influenced the faculty. In terms of relationships with the administration, students were becoming much more willing to protest and to do that in ways that hadn't been seen at Macalester before.

[10:14]

LZ: To focus now on your work, in the educational research and what exactly your role was in that, and what your goals were for that research.

JR: Okay, let me respond in two different ways. The first two years that I was here, going back to that grant that brought me here, it had been a study of faculty advising. There were six faculty who had been relieved of one course that they would ordinarily have taught, to devote more time to working with a group of fifteen students. The concept was that they would have more intensive involvement with a group of students. And the hypothesis would be that those students would have a better experience at Macalester than those that were sort of randomly assigned to faculty members. So, my job during those first two years was to see what kind of impact this particular program had on the students, in terms of student retention, attitudes toward the college, and that sort of thing. That grant concluded, and by that time the college had gotten an endowment to perpetuate this—an Office of Educational Research. I was asked to coordinate that office initially. We had two or three goals. One was to try to do something that would today be called the assessment of student learning. I mean essentially the rest of the world of higher education eventually caught up with this visionary project in some sense, because assessment is now a big deal. At that time, in the 1960s people didn't really know much about it. But our goal was to say, "To what extent are we really accomplishing what we say we're trying to

accomplish” in terms of the mission of the college, and the objectives and that sort of thing. We were to collect some data that would attempt to answer those questions. That is, collect some sort of benchmark data—how are we doing in terms of student retention, and attitudes of students towards the experiences that they're having? Those were the two main goals I think that we had in mind for the Educational Research Office.

[12:26]

LZ: What did, how was that information then used, to kind of make changes at Macalester.

JR: We did two or three things. First of all, the report line varied a little bit through the years, but typically the office would report to the Chief Academic Officer. Who else did we report to? I think for a while we might have reported to the Chief Business Officer. In addition to that we had an advisory committee of faculty, and so we tried to stay in touch with the faculty so that we could have a better idea of some of the issues that the faculty would think we should be pursuing as well. To the extent that the work of the office had an impact, it was through the Chief Academic Officer and the President eventually. We would go to them and say, “Here's what we think we're finding and here are some suggestions for some changes that the institution might consider.”

[13:27]

LZ: What were some of the more specific issues that were found in that research that really, that highlight that time for you, I guess.

JR: Well, part of it had to do with retention. As I said, in the mid 1960s, not much more than one-third of the students who came here were actually graduating. And we all recognized that as an ongoing problem. We tried to ask ourselves, “What are some ways in which we can improve the student retention at the college?” and look at some alternative ways in which that could be approached? It’s clearly not only because of what we did, but it’s so nice now that we’re up to—what is it now—somewhere between eighty and ninety percent of the students who enroll at Macalester wind up graduating in four or five years. That’s just...much more satisfying for faculty and certainly for administrators to see that happen. I think that that was one area. We were involved early on in the beginnings of department reviews, which now is just kind of standard practice. Every academic department gets reviewed every six or seven or eight years. But at that time, if I remember correctly, we had a grant early on to help us get that process started and to help provide some support to the departments. Any time a department is doing a review, a very important part of that is a self-study. They would look closely at themselves and say “What do we think we’re doing well and what are some things that we might improve upon?” And then they put together a report and the report goes to an external person or committee to review. They come in and meet with the department, and say “Yes, here are some things that are going well, but here are some other things you might think about doing.” We were trying to help facilitate that department review process.

[15:22]

LZ: Can you speculate as to why Macalester put an emphasis on this at a time when most people weren't kind of reviewing themselves?

JR: Yes, it's an interesting question. During the second year that I was here, the man who then was the Chief Academic Officer—I may have mentioned him earlier, Lu Garvin—Lu was a philosophy Ph.D. who had come to Macalester from Oberlin. He had a pretty good working relationship with a man named Paul Davis. Paul Davis was an advisor to DeWitt Wallace. Clearly Mr. Wallace was a very important benefactor to the college at that time. Most of the money that came to Macalester from Mr. and Mrs. Wallace, from the *Reader's Digest*, came with the assistance of Paul Davis. Paul Davis was living in California at that time. But he would periodically come to campus and would talk with faculty or administrators about ideas that they might have, or something that they think might be helpful to have some money for. And I think out of one of those conversations came this idea of endowing an Office of Educational Research and Innovation. So that's how that came about. I think Paul Davis said to Lu Garvin, “Why don't you write a proposal.” And again those were heady times. Lu Garvin asked me to help him with that. One weekend we put some ideas on paper. If I remember it wasn't more than two or three pages of stuff that we thought we could do. We sent that to Paul Davis. I think within six weeks it was announced that we had a \$1.5 million dollar endowment for Educational Research and Innovation at Macalester. It doesn't work that way anymore!

[17:22]

LZ: So at the same time you were also teaching in the Psychology Department, at least after a few years, and if you could kind of describe that experience on the other side of teaching.

JR: Sure. I have had two different full-time teaching experiences at Macalester. The Office of Research eventually became known as the Office of Research and Planning. During the difficult

times, financially, that Macalester was having in the mid '70s, the decision was to take this money, the \$1.5 million dollar endowment, and shift it over to do something else. So, that meant that the Office of Research and Planning didn't exist anymore. From '75 to '77, then, I worked full-time in the Psychology Department and taught full-time. In '77/'78, I had what was called an American Council on Education administrative fellowship. This was a national competition for forty faculty members from around the country who thought they might like to try academic administration. I was awarded one of those fellowships, in '77/'78. An A.C.E. fellow was supposed to have a mentor, or more than one mentor. In my case I needed to stay in the Twin Cities because my wife was in a Ph.D. program at the U at that time. So it was not going to work for us to pull up stakes and go elsewhere. So, I worked with John Davis, who then was President, and John Linnell, who was Academic Vice-President, and also did a little work with Peter Magrath who then was the President of the University of Minnesota. In April of that year, in the midst of this fellowship, John Linnell died very suddenly, and I was named Acting Academic Vice-President. Then there was a national search the next year, and then I was named the Academic VP. That role continued from '78 to '86, and then starting in '87 I was full-time again in the Psychology Department. Now to get back to your original question, what was it like to work with the students? For essentially these last twenty years, from '87 through this year, I've been full-time in the department and it's been wonderful. Students are so terrific. And I think we have an excellent department of psychology. We work well together. I can't imagine a better way to conclude my career at Macalester than having taught full-time in the psychology department.

[20:03]

LZ: What types of courses do you generally specialize in and teach?

JR: I did four or five different courses. One of the courses that I enjoyed working with was one we called Directed Research, which is our junior course—required for all the juniors. Students do a term-long empirical research project. They come up with an idea for a study, do a literature review, and collect data and analyze data, and then present the findings at the Minnesota Undergraduate Psychology Conference in the Spring of that year. I've worked with a lot of students on their directed research projects, and have very much enjoyed that. I taught Introductory Psychology several times, and always enjoyed that. But another course that I taught for many years, even before I was full-time in the department, is Industrial/Organizational Psychology. I enjoyed doing that. A course I liked to teach very much, but clearly student interests were heading in other directions, so we finally took it out of the curriculum, was a course called Psychological Measurement. I just love the field of tests and measurement. Testing has such a significant impact on peoples' lives these days that I just thought it was valuable for all of us to get a little better understanding of how testing works, and what the social implications of testing are. A course related to testing that I taught just once or twice, was a senior seminar in intelligence. I had a good time with that. There was a senior seminar, Psychology in Global Perspective, that I enjoyed doing. A course that I taught most recently, and I did this one several times, was a senior seminar in family psychology. I mentioned my wife was in graduate school in the '70s. She then wound up on the faculty of the University of Minnesota in family education. We had realized some overlapping research interests, but hadn't done much with that until about ten years ago. We went to a meeting in Boston and became aware of a database that existed at Radcliffe. We looked at that more closely and wound up

identifying a project that we thought would be interesting. That sort of got me engaged, or at least thinking about the idea of doing a seminar in family psychology. And that is one that seems to have struck a responsive chord not only with me but with a group of students. We had a good time doing it.

[22:48]

LZ: You obviously enjoy teaching and yet you've held a lot of administrative types of roles. And I guess, was that something you had envisioned as a goal for yourself, that you would do more administrative things, or was that just something that happened as your career developed?

JR: Yes, I was not very good about planning my career. Things just sort of happened I'm afraid. Through the years, Macalester has had some fine administrators. But on the other hand, I would periodically say to myself, "I could do that job a lot better than the person who's doing it now." And so that was the sort of itch that got me motivated to apply for this A.C.E. fellowship. That was what got me started down the pathway of doing something more in the main stream of academic administration. And it was a great experience. I very much enjoyed that experience, but it's not the sort of thing that I would want to do forever and ever and always. It was very nice to be able to return to a full-time teaching position.

[23:57]

LZ: Now might be a nice time to focus on your work as the Vice-President of Academic Affairs. Now is that essentially what the Provost position is now?

JR: Right. Essentially the same...same position. When Bob Gavin came as President—he had come here from Haverford College in Philadelphia. I had the title of V.P. for Academic Affairs. Haverford had Provosts, and Bob Gavin decided it was important to change the job title to Provost. The responsibilities haven't changed very much through the years.

[24:28]

LZ: So, kind of describe how...you had said how you had gotten involved in that position, but what that was like serving as the Vice-President?

JR: Well, it was a great experience. From my point of view, the two toughest jobs in high level administrative jobs at a place like Macalester are the Dean of Students and the Provost, or the Chief Academic Officer. And I just have such great respect for Laurie Hamre. I mean she has been just wonderful in that position. But that is such a challenging job and there are so many issues. But, similarly, there are a lot of issues, complex issues, that wind up on the desk of the Provost/Vice-President for Academic Affairs. At a place the size of Macalester, most full-time faculty assume that they have sort of a direct line to the Provost. So, there is a Department Chair, but if I am a faculty member with a real thorn under my saddle, I'm going to go talk to the Provost about it. So it's a very busy kind of job. And at that time, when I was doing it, there was a half-time, let's see we used the title Faculty Associate. This was somebody who was primarily a faculty member, but who did some administrative things for part of the time. Both the two Faculty Associates who worked with me were women. And that was about it. Now there are two or three other kind of administrative folks who help the Provost out. It was a very busy job. But, it felt as though, if you were making good decisions, you were doing things that were very

helpful to the college. And so it was satisfying in that sense. I worked closely with the other three or four people who were direct reports to the President, as well as with the President. So you develop kind of intense relationships with those people. And most of the time those were good relationships so I enjoyed that kind of opportunity as well.

[26:38]

LZ: What were some of the issues that you...that came up that you really had to deal with?

JR: Well, there weren't any dramatic situations like, "Wow what are we going to do about this terrible, terrible issue." But I guess one of the most satisfying things about my time in that position was realizing—after, let's say, the sixth or seventh year I was doing this—that I really was having a pretty significant impact on the future of the college, in the sense that I had hired about a third of the faculty. And I played a very active role in helping to make certain that we wound up with good appointments. I think I helped develop a much more systematic process for both the recruitment and the selection of faculty. I think it had been a little more haphazard before I got involved in that process. I tried to work very hard on affirmative action kinds of issues, and particularly getting more women on the faculty. I think when I became the Chief Academic Officer there were maybe twenty or twenty-five percent of the faculty who were women. I think we increased that significantly within a seven or eight year period. So, you know, it wasn't as though there was a takeover of a building or something like that, but it was more just kind of the day by day, week by week, how can we do a better job of improving the academic experience for students? I tried to keep working with faculty to make sure the curriculum was headed in directions that we felt were important. I had several conversations

with faculty about the language requirement. This was one of the things that had changed at Macalester through the years. When I came here in the '60s, there was a two year language requirement. In 1969, the language requirement was dropped completely. Then it came back for a period of time as a one year language requirement. After I was no longer the Academic VP, eventually it came back to the two year language requirement. So it sort of went round and round and we had many heated conversations about that.

[28:57]

LZ: Were...was that the time when the Interim period was discussed? Would that have been during your...?

JR: Well, yes it was discussed, but at that time Interim was still viewed fairly positively. We were I think the second or third college in the country that adopted the Interim term. That was January of '64, when we began the Interim term. So it started just before I came here in the fall of '64. And so, there would be a few faculty, and certainly occasionally a Board member or two who would—this is now in the '70s and '80s—who would take a potshot at the Interim. Inevitably, there was a course that looked a little schlocky to people on the outside. You know, “How can we be offering that?” But, there were enough good things going on that we didn't have to deal a lot with that. Having said that, I do remember one incident now. One of my colleagues in the Psychology Department had decided to offer an Interim course dealing with human sexuality. And, this was at a time when there weren't a lot of courses in the curriculum of Macalester or other colleges dealing with human sexuality. And one of the other members of the faculty caught wind of this and protested. And the newspapers picked up on this, so we were on

the front page of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, for a day or two about this particular course. To his credit, the President stayed the course, the course was taught, and Macalester survived.

[30:47]

LZ: How involved were you in that position with the students and with the faculty? Was there a direct kind of connection there, or was it more kind of administrative?

JR: Lot of involvement with faculty. Huge amount of involvement with faculty. With students, less—and it would be primarily with either a reporter from the *Mac Weekly*, who would want to talk about some issue of the day, or with some of the leadership of the student government that would want to talk about some concerns. But, other than that, there was not as much student involvement as I would have liked.

[31:28]

LZ: What were the main concerns of faculty, and what was that kind of relationship like, that you had with them?

JR: Well, a lot of faculty concerns, appropriately, are for their own academic department. This was a time when Macalester was going through lean financial times. And so we had to look very carefully at every dollar that was being spent. On the one hand that's good, so you aren't spending money needlessly. But on the other hand, it would have been so nice to have a little more flexibility. So inevitably faculty would come in saying “they need more money for their department to do this”, or “we're not keeping up with faculty salaries, and we need to do

something about that.” I suppose, curriculum and staffing and departmental budgets were frequent conversations that we had.

[32:38]

LZ: What were some of the issues that students really took up in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s? Obviously Vietnam was big in the ‘60s, but were there other kind of activist issues that took the place of Vietnam?

JR: I don't remember any single hot topic that students were concerned about at that time. By the mid-to-late '70s most of the Vietnam concerns had pretty well gone away. And while environmental issues were beginning to emerge, and community engagement issues were very important—there weren't major protests. I remember one very important conversation that I had with a student—who has gone on to be a major leader in this community—about a faculty member who was being considered for a departmental appointment. This student was a strong advocate for the faculty candidate. So we had very significant conversations about academic issues. And those were wonderful conversations, because those things are so important. So I think those were more important at that time than some of the global issues of the 1960s and ‘70s had been.

[33:57]

LZ: How did you then decide to step down from that position and return to teaching as a faculty member?

JR: Well, the job of Chief Academic Officer tends to be one in which there is fairly rapid turnover. And it depends upon who the President is. So, the first six years that I was in the job, I was working with John Davis. He and I had a great relationship. A new President came in—Bob Gavin. I said to him right away, “You probably want to develop your own team, and I'm ready to do something else as well.” So I stayed on for a couple of years, and then he did a national search in 1985-86. Most Chief Academic Officers do one of three things after leaving their CAO position. They discover they really like administration, but they'd like to become a president somewhere. And typically that means moving someplace else. Or, they like doing academic affairs, but they're ready for a different setting. And again they want to move someplace else. Or third, they return to the faculty. It was the return to the faculty option that seemed the most attractive to me.

[35:13]

LZ: Can you elaborate on what it was like to work with John Davis when he was President?

JR: Yes, that was a wonderful experience. Macalester had come through a very tumultuous period, from January of 1971 until the summer of '75. January of '71 was when Arthur Flemming was fired, and then there was an interim President for the rest of that year. And then a man named James Robinson had come as President in the Fall of '71, and he was here until Fall of '74. Macalester was going through a very hard time financially, and there was a lot of student protest that was taking place. It was in '74, that 77 Macalester was taken over by a group of students because of cutbacks that were being considered in what was then called the EEO Program. So, John Davis came at a time when Macalester needed to heal from a lot of things.

And he was just wonderful in that role. He was a very consensus-building kind of leader. I worked with him from '78 to '84. He left in '84. There were important issues with which we were dealing. Five or six of us would sit around the President's staff table and we would have vigorous, vigorous discussions. But before we left the room John would always say "Alright, this is what I hear you say, and this is what we're going to do, is everybody okay with this decision? Are we all going to be able to walk out of this room and agree with this decision that's been made?" It was just so important to have that kind of leader at that time, because we had come through periods of time when person A would say this, person B would say that, and you would say, "Wait a minute, what's going on here". So, you just didn't know. John was a very high quality kind of person. I learned a lot working with John Davis.

[37:32]

LZ: What was the transition from being in an administrative role back to teaching? Was that a real adjustment for you, or was it kind of a relief after your duties?

JR: It was a relief in the sense that the hours weren't quite as long, I guess—although there were still a lot of long hours that first year or two, getting back up to speed. I was so fortunate that the colleagues in the Psychology Department at that time were very supportive, and helped me make that transition in a very positive way. So it was basically an easy transition.

[38:19]

LZ: Did you find that your experience working in the educational research background and then as the Vice-President of Academic Affairs, did you feel that influenced or changed your teaching

style in any way perhaps from when you first started?

JR: Well, it certainly helped me know that I ought to pay a lot of attention, whenever I designed a course, to what it is that I want the students to learn. If I'm not going to be hypocritical, I'd better be asking that same question about my course. So I hope that I did a better job of designing courses in that way. And then helping to conduct courses in ways that were leading towards that kind of learning that we said we were trying to accomplish.

[39:13]

LZ: You had mentioned that then you became the Chair of the Psychology Department? If you could just elaborate on what that experience was like and how long you did that.

JR: I think I was Chair for ten or eleven years. That position is not one that is highly sought after by faculty in most departments. So I guess it was two or three years after I came back to the department full-time. But I think we had co-chairs of the department, and one or the other or both of them came to me and said, "Rossmann, how about it? Are you willing to do it?" So, I did. And once again I was fortunate in that there were several retirements that were taking place in the department. I thought by putting some extra time and energy in getting the rest of the colleagues engaged in the process, that we could make some hires that were going to have a significant impact on the future of the department and on student learning and psychology, and I'm very pleased. I think it turned out about as well we'd hoped it would.

[40:22]

LZ: During your time at Macalester were you engaged in any of your own kind of personal research or publication in addition to your...other things you were doing?

JR: Yes. I did a lot of publishing those first ten or twelve years, and I was fortunate in having access to some wonderful data. And so we tried to both pull our research together that would be helpful to the college but periodically felt there would be something that looked like it was interesting enough that a broader audience ought to be able to learn about this. So I was able to get a lot of articles published during that period. I went on sabbatical in 1971/'72 to the American Council on Education in Washington, and planned to go only for six months, but got involved in a research project there related to the City University of New York, which at that time had moved to what they were calling open admissions. This was a big departure for the higher education system of New York City. I worked with a man named Alexander Astin at ACE. I got fairly involved in the project during that first six months, so Sandy asked me to stay on for another year and complete that project. So we wound up with a scholarly research monograph, coming out of that. A book was published, and...I felt good about that. I came back to Macalester, and then did a little bit more publishing in the way of articles. But within a couple of years, when I shifted over to the Academic VP job, I felt I couldn't find any time to do research while I was doing that. Since coming back to the Psychology Department full-time in '87, I decided that...I still loved to do research, but, that I wanted to do it with students. So I had a fair amount of success in working with students on projects. And we'd get papers presented at conferences. My wife, Marty, and I got involved in a research project. We've given papers in Stockholm and Singapore, based upon the research that we were doing.

[42:56]

LZ: What was that like, working so closely with students on projects?

JR: Oh, it was terrific. Just great. So, that's been one of the joys of these last few years, collaborating with students.

[43:09]

LZ: When did you receive tenure and what was that process like for you?

JR: It was very different in the 1960s from what it is today. It is much more systematic today. I think I got tenure in 1969. I was offered a job at another institution, and I went in and talked with the man who then was Provost and said, "I have this offer, it looks attractive, my wife and I like the Twin Cities, so I would be willing to consider staying here, but I think the only way that it makes sense for me to stay here is if I have tenure." So he went and talked with the Faculty Personnel Committee, and I learned that I had gotten tenure. Today it is, much more systematic, and I think I played a little bit of a role when I was Academic VP in making it a more systematic process than what it had been.

[44:25]

LZ: In looking through old *Mac Weekly* articles I had noticed that you were involved with a number of committees, and a lot of them had to do with the new planning of the new athletic center, but also searches for athletic directors. I was curious how you got involved with that aspect, given that you were doing all these other things as well.

JR: Well, that's a good question. Let's see. Partly I think it relates to the fact that my family and I have lived across the street from the college since 1964, and I just loved coming over to basketball games or football games. So I would show up at a lot of these kinds of athletic events. And I had a lot of students who were athletes. So I would enjoy seeing them in a different context outside the classroom. The man who then had been Athletic Director said at some point, "Would you be interested in becoming the faculty athletic representative?" And I said, "Well, maybe, but there's somebody else doing that now, so let's wait and see." Then, the last year that Mike McPherson was here—the year before he went to the Spencer Foundation—he stopped me on the sidewalk one day and said, "Any chance you'd be willing to coordinate a planning committee for a new athletics facility?" He said, "We've got some people that we think could be helpful in pulling this project together." He also said, "There's a faculty member in Art who's going to do something similar for the Fine Arts Complex. We're going to keep these two projects moving along at the same time. But if you're willing to help with this year-long project, we'll see what happens." And it turned out that that, the timing was good. One of the members of the committee was willing to give us a planning grant, and so we were kind of off and running with the MARC [Macalester Athletic and Recreation Center] complex. So that was one way that I was involved. I guess maybe it was even before that, that Mike has asked me to chair the search committee for a new Athletic Director. So I think that really was the first formal involvement that I had. That was when we hired Irv Cross. A year later after we hired Irv, Mike asked if I would be the faculty athletic rep. Those are the things that kind of had come together. So, Mike McPherson played a very important role at getting me involved in the Athletic Center. That's the bottom line.

[47:10]

LZ: Had you ever done anything similar to that in Athletics? Was there always an underlying interest there, was that just something that kind of randomly happened?

JR: More random than anything else. My bias, and this is strongly influenced by my involvement at Macalester, is just that Division III athletics is the way that college athletics should be. I just have felt badly through the years that with this Division III philosophy, we haven't been able to implement it as effectively as we might have at Macalester. That we were doing so many things well, and yet in athletics we weren't doing things very well. And so...so there was sort of always that nagging concern on my part. And so when I was asked if I could do something that I thought might help get us where we should be, why I couldn't turn that down.

[48:02]

LZ: Do you think this new kind of complex will put a new emphasis on sports at Macalester?

JR: Well, it's not so much just on sports, in the sense of competitive sports. But I think on wellness as well. That's one of the nice things about this—that it's not just a new gymnasium for the basketball team. It's a facility for the whole student body. So I think it's going to be wonderful. And I think if we had somebody from the admissions office here they would say it will be helpful. In the past, we have had to kind of hang our heads and mumble, when we walked through the athletics complex. And so, I think it will be a wonderful improvement.

[48:43]

LZ: Given that you have been in the field of teaching and in administration and also research, is there one area that you prefer or that you've found that you've liked more, gravitated more towards, I guess you have that unique experience of having been on three very different kind of realms of the educational world.

JR: I just feel so lucky in having had sort of three mini-careers within one, and so I've never gotten bored. And I think each of them has lasted just about the right length of time. But it's been so nice to finish off as a full-time faculty member. I think that's a great kind of capstone experience.

[49:27]

LZ: In 2006 you were involved with the Self-Study Committee, and these questions kind of have to do with the changes that you've seen. And I guess given that you were so involved with research in the '60s and then this committee, have you been able to really highlight some major changes that you've seen in Macalester?

JR: That's always a good and important question. Several years ago I was asked to give a talk to, I think, the 60th year reunion class. So I went back and I looked at the catalog from the period when they were here as students. And I couldn't believe how similar the general structure of the curriculum was, now seventy years ago probably, as compared to what it is today. So, on the one hand, "Dear old Macalester, ever the same," right? But, clearly that's not the whole answer. There are at least two significant changes. One is in the area of faculty. And we're so fortunate

now in being able to recruit almost any faculty member that we want. That was not true thirty or forty years ago. I mean, we had some fine faculty. But today, because of the compensation package, and the fact that we're so unique in being—in my point of view—a first-rate liberal arts college in an urban setting, we are more attractive to many faculty. So I think that's one change that has taken place: our ability to recruit and retain very good faculty. Second is the nature of the student body. And I guess I would see it in two ways. We've had excellent students throughout the whole time I've been here. But I think the bottom part of the continuum has moved up much higher than what it was. So, these last ten or fifteen years, any student that I've had in my class has just been wonderful to work with. And twenty-five, thirty years ago, they were still good students, but there were some that weren't quite sure why they were here, and weren't quite sure they really wanted to be here, in some ways. Clearly, the other change with regard to students has to do with the geographic diversity. I mentioned earlier that in the mid-sixties we were still recruiting mainly from Minnesota. I think three-fourths of the students were from Minnesota. Now maybe twenty percent of the students come from Minnesota, and we have a much greater representation of international students, which is terrific.

[52:09]

LZ: Have you seen a change in teaching styles among the faculty? I guess one thing that's come up is the addition of technology in the classroom and how that's played out and changed things.

JR: Yes, I think two changes. I mean certainly there are many faculty today who still rely very heavily on a lecture-discussion kind of mode, and do it very well. So I'm not knocking the lecture per se. But I think a lot more faculty see teaching, in a Macalester context at least, as

involving a lot more discussion, a lot more active learning, and that can go in a whole variety of ways. And then the addition of technology—it probably plays a little less important role here than in some other institutions in which there are huge classes. But obviously there are some technological changes that do work here, and I think faculty are doing a nice job of using them.

[53:09]

LZ: Did you find that your personal teaching style evolved?

JR: Yes, to some extent. Not on the technology front. I marvel at all the wonders of technology, but...about five years ago said, “You know, I'd have to really devote a lot of time in order to get up to speed on this, and I don't have that much time left here,” so I...manage email, and a few other things, but I haven't brought technology into the classroom to any great extent. But, I think what I have done is move away from that kind of stand and deliver approach—the assumption that if you're an instructor you must stand in front of the class and talk for fifty minutes, to a much more, I hope, engaging format in which we all agree on some important questions we want to talk about, and we bring a variety of perspectives to try to answer those questions. And that's a style that seems to have worked pretty well for me.

[54:00]

LZ: So we had been talking about changes in...general changes in campus and one thing I was curious about was, have you seen a change in the types of things that students become kind of active about, and have you seen a change then in the way they assert themselves about these issues.

JR: Recently I think there have been at least two issues that students have become particularly interested in. One of those is the environment. And I think that's playing itself out in a very positive way at the college. And the other is community engagement of one kind or another. This has been a long term value at Macalester. But I think now it's being done in a very effective and systematic way, and students are key to that process.

[54:47]

LZ: You may not be as close to this aspect, but have you seen changes in student life and dorm life or kind of weekend activities, things like that.

JR: The only change I have seen, which again I think is so good, is the great increase in the number of student organizations. We came through a period, and this was probably post-Vietnam and in the late '70s, early '80s, when students were just not interested in any kind of organizations. The attitude seemed to be, "Just sort of leave me alone and I have a few good friends and we'll hang out, but I'm not interested in being engaged in an organization." As someone who had grown up in the '50s and sort of thrived on student organizations I thought "Oh no, this is too bad." And so my bias is I'm delighted that there are a lot of different kinds of student organizations in which students are involved now. In terms of social life in the dorms and so on, I don't know.

[55:45]

LZ: Um, how have you seen the political climate on campus kind of change from being very fired, do you see that it's a little more calm today, or that we're still pretty much political.

JR: For the last several years I've been asked to help the Alumni Office collect survey data from the reunion classes: the twenty-five year and fifty-year reunion classes. There's one item that we've included on those questionnaires that is the same item that first year students fill out when they arrive at Macalester. I'm sure you remember when you were a first year student, the first or second day you were here, filling out a three or four page questionnaire. One of the items was "How would you describe yourself politically," ranging from very liberal to very conservative, on a five point continuum. So, we've used that same item with the alumni questionnaires. The interesting thing is that the fifty year reunion classes look quite different from both current students and twenty-five year reunion classes. But, students from twenty-five years ago, in terms of their self-description of political liberalism, are very similar to current students at Macalester. Having said that, if you look at the broad spectrum of colleges across the country, Macalester—on this kind of an item—is way out on one end of the continuum in terms of political liberalism. So, we may not have the radical demonstrations, the Jerry Rubins, and that sort of thing as we did in 1969 and '70. But the basic commitment to liberal political values is very much alive and well at Macalester College.

[57:37]

LZ: In the last couple of years Macalester has really moved up the ranks in terms of, with other liberal arts colleges, do you see that playing an impact on the college and the types of students that are being recruited to come to Macalester?

JR: I think that among the faculty at least, there is a greater sense of self-confidence. I think through the years, many faculty have felt, “Well, I think we're pretty good, but I don't know if we're as good as we sometimes think we are.” And I don't hear that anymore. And it's not an arrogance. We haven't gone that route. I don't hear anybody being arrogant about Macalester, and we continue appropriately to ask good questions about ourselves. But I think there's a sense now that we really are pretty good. We're doing a lot of things right, and that's just nice.

[58:39]

LZ: Have you seen the relationship between students and faculty, and then again between students and administration, again a different type of relationship from what it might have been thirty years, twenty years ago?

JR: Let me talk about student-faculty first. As I would see it at least, we simply went through this little blippy period when students were saying in many ways, to some faculty, “We don't really need you. We know what we want to do.” That hadn't been true when I first came here, and I certainly don't see it as true anymore. In general, I find a very positive relationship between students and faculty. There is a lot of mutual respect going both ways, which is the way it should be. So, there's been that change. In terms of student-administration relationships, our Presidents over this period of time were probably in a better position to respond to that than I am. I think Macalester students have always tended to be, the phrase that John Davis liked to use was, “Heel biters.” And that's good, and that's still the way it is.

[59:54]

LZ: What is your involvement today, currently with the college?

JR: Short term, next weekend I'm going to be giving a presentation at the twenty-five year and fifty year reunion classes. And that'll wrap up that part of my career. I think from that point on, Marty and I will continue to host two or three social events for the Psychology Department at our home, as long as we're able to do that. And as long as I'm able, I'm going to play tennis with some Macalester colleagues. So that's my involvement.

[1:00:27]

LZ: Do you feel like retired faculty have a big enough presence still, in the campus, or in a lot of ways does it feel as though when most professors retire, then that's kind of, that ends their involvement with the college?

JR: I think that's a very individual kind of thing. I think that for many retired faculty they're pleased to get their last paycheck and be out the door. And for others, if the opportunity presents itself, there are some ways in which those retired faculty can be involved. And my impression is that the college is quite open to a whole variety of kinds of opportunities for retired faculty.

[1:01:05]

LZ: Do you have a favorite memory or maybe a favorite couple kind of memories throughout your time here at Macalester?

JR: Two things come to mind. One, in probably April, April or early May of 1979. So April or May of 1979, I had been the acting Vice-President for Academic Affairs that year. There had been a national search. I knew it was down to three people who were being considered for the Vice-President for Academic Affairs. And one morning at about 7:15 or 7:30 I was taking the garbage out the phone rang, my wife answered it. She called me, said, "John Davis is on the phone." John Davis said, "Jack, we want you to be the Vice-President for Academic Affairs." A very positive memory. A second one would have been at Commencement of 1986, the last year that I was the Academic VP, when my son graduated. And I was able to award him his diploma and give him a hug.

[1:02:16]

LZ: Is there anything that you foresee on the horizon for Macalester that you find particularly exciting for the College?

JR: Right outside our window is a very exciting event with the new athletics complex. I think that'll be great. It'll be equally nice when the new Fine Arts complex is completely remodeled. And I think just the general spirit, that there's a lot of momentum behind Macalester now in a whole variety of ways. I see that as continuing.

LZ: Though we've covered the majority of my questions, is there anything that you would like to add that you feel we haven't covered that we should be bringing up?

JR: You've done a great job of asking questions.

LZ: Well thank you, that's all I have.

JR: Thanks.

[End of Disc 1:02:57]