

Interviewee: Pratt, Joe

Interview Date: September 14, 2011

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Joe Pratt
University of Houston Oral History Project

Interviewed by:

Natalie Garza

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Transcribed by:

Michelle Kokes

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Architecture Building at University of Houston, Houston, Texas

NG: This is Natalie Garza and I am interviewing Dr. Joe Pratt on September 14, 2011 in the Architecture building at the University of Houston. So can you begin by telling me your full name?

JP: Joseph Alan Pratt.

NG: Okay and I'm not going to ask you biographical information because we are going to do that in a different interview. I want to talk about your experiences at the University of Houston can you tell me what your official position is right now?

JP: I came here in 1986 as something called a NEH Cullen Professor of History and Business it was a joint appointment of chair that is housed both in the Management Department of Business School and the History Department. What I do mainly is study oil and modern oil so it's kind of history but it's also kind of business.

NG: And you went to undergrad at Rice?

JP: Yes.

NG: So you had some familiarity with the University of Houston before you came as a professor?

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JP: A little bit more from before I came to Rice I grew up 100 miles to the east around Beaumont and we used to come to the campus for various things. So I've been coming to U of H since probably 1960 or '62.

NG: Did you have any ideas about the University of Houston before you came as a faculty member?

JP: Yes and some of it shaped by the old name Cougar High and some of it shaped by the people I knew who left Rice and came here and we would talk about how much easier it was. But it's... I've also been impressed all my life with the idea of public universities and in particular with the University of Houston being Houston's university. We came here a lot in junior high and high school for interscholastic league events including sports. If a sports team was going to make it to Houston we always had to come to Houston and I was also a ready writer who won district once and came to U of H and lost badly in the ready writing at the regional level in one of these old buildings I think is Roy Cullen.

NG: What is that ready writing?

JP: They gave you a topic and they gave you three hours to write this wonderful essay and mine wasn't so wonderful.

NG: So you said that you thought that there was something important about public universities?

JP: Always have, yes.

NG: Can you explain that?

JP: I think it's my background my parents neither finished high school. My dad dropped out of school in the 7th grade and I'm the first one in either side of the family

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ever to go to college and Rice was a fluke. I test well so I got a National Merit Scholarship. I didn't know what Rice was. What I knew about Rice is they had these funky all blue football uniforms and I had no counseling in high school. Nobody went to a good school from my high school. So the university of choice for all of us the default option was always Lamar University which had I was glorious my dad and I would go to basketball games there and things. The idea of a university Lamar was my ideal and U of H was a lot better than that, so U of H looked awfully good.

NG: So when you came as a faculty member what was your impressions about diversity on the campus?

JP: I had been at A & M and I had a good job at A & M and one of the main reasons I came is because I really didn't like to teach at A & M because of the lack of diversity among the student body. And it's not just ethnic or color but just opinions it was... I teach stuff that requires discussion and I had to... I found myself class after class being kind of posing as if I was being somebody else to get the response from these really conservative suburban Houston, Dallas and San Antonio students that at the time filled all of A & M. The only farmer I ever taught that I knew of at A & M was my cousin Randy from [REDACTED] (3.52) Texas who came into my office, "Hey Joe what you doing?" He was a farmer! So I loved U of H from the start in '86 I got here in January '86, it wasn't nearly as diverse of the student body, the faculty wasn't very diverse at all. But compared to, I had been to, actually I for a moment in time I was a tenured professor at University of California Berkley and even there (there was a big Asian population) but it wasn't very much diversity of I think I'm trying to say class, economic background. It was pretty privileged kids and U of H wasn't all privileged kids. I really liked to teach

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first generation college students. I feel like I can take students that I share the background and I can really do something good with them.

NG: When did you get started on issues of diversity at the university?

JP: I was trying to remember that last night in preparation. Almost from the moment I walked in I started being put on these diversity committees which were all the rage then and I don't know why. It could be a lot of times at U of H I've been appointed to substantial committee positions because I am a full professor with a chair but also I'm in two colleges and they can count it as somebody from business and somebody from CLASS (College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences), that happens to be the same person. I don't know why. I don't remember I didn't... I don't know what I would have said that would have identified me as a person that cared about this. I wasn't... I was teaching things completely unrelated to race. I have very strong opinions about it so maybe just people heard me talking about it and I probably I said I'm from this region and I came here in part because I want to teach at a university open to all of Houston. I probably just said that somewhere in some administration said, "Okay put him on the committee." But I started we had these presidential committees and you just get a letter (we weren't getting emails yet) and it would say, "Would you do this? Would you be on this committee?" I would always say yes and that's where I met Elwin Lee who is now, I don't know he's got a new job he's not the Dean of Students anymore. He was a tenured law professor and he would get the same (he was a black guy) and he would get the same email and we just got to be friends. So I met a cluster of really interesting black Alums including Gene Locke the guy who just ran for mayor was on those committees. There was this glorious woman named Nia Becnel who was an architect, an architecture

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professor, African American woman from Houston who came to U of H and stayed and died a really tragically at about the age of 42 or something like that a long time ago. She was just this special person this... when she was in a room everybody talked to her. That group had been identified the African American group because they had been here and were activists and had helped create the African American Studies program when they were undergraduates they were really... Gene Locke was a serious black activist before he became a corporate lawyer and ran for mayor. A guy named Deloyd Parker who ran the S.H.A.P.E. Community Center over here by Yates was one of those guys. So I started and once, and you know once it was clear that I would go to the meetings and be serious it was my fate and I think I didn't make much difference on the campus level until on the campus level I was put on a search committee looking for a president and I wish I could remember the dates we'll have to look them up but it was a really good search committee and it's the committee that ended up hiring Marguerite Ross Barnett who was the first black woman, probably the first black and the first woman a double first in this whole region that was president of a university. So I think that search committee kind of labeled me as somebody who is going to be serious about this and we got to the... the search committee, Marguerite Ross Barnett you probably know her story. She stayed here a couple of years and died of cancer before she was 50 years old. She was a person who was going to end up running Stanford or Harvard or something some day. We had her here for a moment in time and then she died. It was a funny moment and I'm very proud to be in the middle of it and do what I figured was the right thing. We, the search committee chose her and a bunch of the older and normal candidates that would have normally been president of U of H, you know 55 year old white guy that has searched

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them for you, they kept dropping out when they saw that she was in the thing because they assumed she would win at U of H and in particular with anywhere. So we ended up with just one candidate and we gave her to the board and the board sent her back to us, the trustees, "No you have to give us multiple choices." We said, we met we argued there was an alumni representative that said, "Houston is just not ready for a black much less a black woman to run U of H" and we said, "But the university is and this is the most qualified person" and we sent her back to the board and said, "This is the choice. You can turn her down if you want and it will be a failed choice if you do" and they took a deep breath and hired her. And that, I think that was a coming out party for that committee. That was a pretty substantial thing to do. I think that was probably... I get time is just merged together now but it was in the 90's and her death really changed the path of our university. She was so good and Austin with the Texas guy and the A & M guy and then here's this young dynamic black woman just burning their butt. She knew how to make U of H good. So I think that, that was the big turning point and then Barnett, the president Barnett made me chair of a Provost search committee that's the chief academic officer and that fell apart when she died and so that was kind of, it was a really sad memory I have of a newspaper somewhere The Daily Cougar that has the picture of her as she died and she was a little woman and she lost a bunch of weight. She had to wear wigs that didn't fit, she had brain cancer it was just... I was meeting with her once a month at least to report on the Provost search and I just, I just wanted to stop and say, "Marguerite go home, sleep, go to Hawaii do something" and she just worked until right before she died and took a vacation to Hawaii and died.

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NG: You said that you thought the path that the university changed with her death, how so?

JP: Right away different Provosts so the academic thing moved a different way. The guy, the candidates in the Provost search were more scientist and I think the symbol, I think we, you do this a lot in the academics you kind of circle around the wilderness for a while looking for the next generation of leadership. It's a very difficult thing for a university to be with interims everywhere. So we had an interim President, interim Provost and a couple years go by and people, it's comforting to have national searches. It's comforting to look hard and we had a long time between those so a lot of disgruntled, or a lot of just morale just, "Okay I've got to do my research." Faculty can always just say, "Oh well I can't do that I'm going to go write a book or something, teach my classes and leave all this alone." So what I did mainly in terms of the diversity issue because I had a good chair, the chair gives you money to do things with discretionary income and because I was in History half the time that's where I'm trained, we had a very good situation in History in which to find diversity because in History and English at least and some other Sociology maybe, there are actually jobs that say "African American History" and "Mexican American History." I gave you a memo (I think I gave it to you) I just, this was probably right after Marguerite Ross Barnett died it might be somewhere in that period the early 90's and I just sat and looked at how did we get to be what our new President would call a Tier 1 History Department? We have all the good people, we had graduate students that we couldn't pay, you know the fellowships weren't as good as anybody else but they were in Houston and kind of like Debbie, they just come into our program and suddenly we've got the graduate student people who could teach anywhere

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if we train them right. But one of the things that seemed clear to me is that the history job market was at the time split up and it wasn't exactly affirmative action but it was something like affirmative action it was a lot of universities needed professors who could teach African American History and Mexican American history because it was a popular and good courses. So I helped convince, I think I lead the History Department in this I believe that would be fair to say to the strategy to say, "If we train as well as we can good African American, good (then minority historians which we kind of quit using that), we can place them at places that our best students have never been able to get jobs at." And it worked and I've read that memo. It wasn't exactly a universal stance in History. You know history is a very you would expect traditional. People study history because they are looking for past trends, so but there were a cluster of faculty that grouped together and did that and a lot... some of it I believe would be attributed to the fact that I had money so I could recruit graduate students who might have better choices that they thought and tell them (as I did a couple of students they are very successful now), "Come to U of H, work with me and this other group of people and the first year I'll pay for it. You don't have to worry about anything and you don't have to work." And I could do that and then I would recruit them and when students got here then we'd find work for them for the 2nd, 3rd, 4th year. So we did really good with African American History. We had for a moment in the mid 90's we were training more African American Ph.D.'s in history than any university in the country we were told. We never figured out the numbering and that cluster is one of the great joys of my teaching life. We had so much fun. We had these seminars, these roving seminars that they didn't get credit for but we all came and people from Texas Southern University and Rice came we just had a ball

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and they all taught each other as much as I was part of it. Linda Reed was a big part of it our first African American faculty member. And they are now, one of them, Amilcar Shabazz is now the chair of African American Studies at U.S. Amherst which is a big deal job. One of my students that I had, an African America student is a full professor at A & M and we have got associate professors at Texas State, Arkansas, a guy that got a tenure track job at Indiana and left because he didn't like it. All kind of good things happened for black and white students but predominantly black. And then we did the same kind of thing in Mexican American History at the tail end of that and I had less to do with that but I was chair and then interim Dean when that was happening so I was in a better position to help and we did things like finance trips of faculty to go down to the valley and recruit people and got another great cluster of students who came up together from you I'm trying to remember of the university where all our first generation Mexican American Students came from.

NG: I think Pan Am UT.

JP: Pan Am yeah. One thing in terms of diversifying the faculty it was earlier, we had a lot of help from one or two Presidents and Provosts and I think probably most of the credit goes to an incredibly good man named George Magner who was a renowned scientist who kept taking those positions on an interim basis because he thought it was his duty to. But he put together a faculty recruitment package (I believe it was George who at least kept it alive) but gave everybody an incentive to find minority faculty members by giving them parts of job spots that they wouldn't get otherwise. So it's just an incentive to say, in History a group of us set up a standing committee that challenged the department to say, "What are our hires coming up in the next 5 years?" and then we

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would look for well qualified minority faculty members in those areas. It worked really well. We hired we probably had one of the more diverse faculties in (certainly in our region) and it's helped the department in all kind of ways and the climax of that motion was a group of faculty members that I was not a part of who created and funded the African American History chair that Richard Blanket and now Gerald Horne had which means a chaired professor with resources to build African American History. The graduate students were in some ways easier. One of the strategies that we used is that we would look around the state colleges and even community colleges, find minority faculty members who were teaching history already and you know get to know them a little bit and then ask if they would be interested in trying to get a Ph.D. and improve their choices in life at work. We did that with Lamar University, Texas Southern, Sam, all kind of Prairie View. They are just this ready make market to come back and get a Ph.D. some of them could even keep working while they were doing it. So the obvious question: does it matter? In terms of the History Department it mattered a lot. We have moved into a more kind of a newer generation of cultural history research with it's an incredibly interesting place to be to know the people and to see the different topics. I sit on quite a few Mexican History Ph.D.'s because I'm an economic historian and they are doing and I'm doing modern economic stuff. So it has enriched our department in all kinds of ways and I think we've kind of taken a deep breath right now and kind of backed away from it. I wish we could gear up again and make another push but one of the things that's happening I'm on, I'm still on all kind of college committees on diversity and one of the things that happens and it's probably good but it makes it different for old guys like me, the concept of diversity is so broadened that it almost doesn't have a meaning at U of H

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anymore. So we are talking in our class about, you know, the idea of being able to, of not being able to look at a big bunch of U of H students and even take an educated guess about what their ethnicity is and then particularly with an Indian American President that hasn't lived through the end of the long history of black-white segregation is a little different tone and just with this kind of diversity when we can say we are one of the most diverse campuses of a major research university in the country. Then you kind of think, "Well maybe we've done our job here, maybe we should move onto other issues," which I don't agree with yet but it's, and I don't think the campus agrees with that but in my lifetime the change has been so revolutionary, so far reaching that it stuns me to hear young black or brown people talking about how far we have left to go. Because we obviously do but if you have some perspective of the last 40 or 50 years it's stunning change at a pace, that's stayed historical. Change doesn't usually happen that fast I don't think. And that's partly shaped by the fact that I am sitting here where I chose to come to University of Houston as opposed to A & M or even Berkley or wherever. This is a place where those issues have been or have been in kind of fast motion.

NG: You mentioned I think Magner was the name.

JP: George Magner.

NG: The program that he instituted to give incentive to faculty that no longer exists?

JP: I think it probably fell victim to funding, it fell victim maybe to a little back lashing, it might have fell victim to the Supreme Court. I never quite was sure. Every President gets to come in and do what he or she wants and a lot of these issues where money's going to flow. This is not giant expenditures but it's discretionary income and on our faculty, it's discretionary job slots which are the most, the scarcest thing in any

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university, particularly a poor university like U of H, who gets to hire how many people is a fundamental question and what George was saying was, "If you are good on this issue you might get over 5 or 6 years one and a half jobs spots that you wouldn't get a before if you were really aggressive and we did that. So instead of having 30 faculties we had 32. I just didn't see who could turn down that bargain particularly if we then matched it with graduate students who could compete for really good jobs and we I think my point about the graduate students came from being very active in faculty recruitment in minority faculty and finally saying, in a fairly short voice to the faculty that we can't justify raiding other universities black faculty (particularly black faculty at the time) and think we're doing something good, we need to expand the pool and that's, it's too easy that was very logical. So and I never thought I'd end this as affirmative action I'm people will disagree with me. It's equal opportunity in Houston if we are going to be the open my doors and let in the students we needed, I do think it matters to see some faculty members that you feel familiar with in some weird way. I was all... I went to Hopkins to graduate school I felt, I did feel like an outsider (it didn't bother me because I was kind of used to that I'd been in the army and everything) but there just weren't many working class Southerners at Hopkins and white black or any color. It was interesting to be the kind of the more of the outside person then the white guy in Port Neches, Texas.

NG: For you what's the importance of diversity in academia?

JP: I think it makes life fuller and I think in history it makes history fuller. The research is really important in history. What we didn't know about our history before the profession opened up to other viewpoints which a lot of young historians (myself included) will choose a research panel that helps them understand their own family, their

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own town, their own community and then live a life expanding that. And when we did that with the faculty we really added layers of history that we just didn't know. And I'm really proud of my students we know more about African American History under Jim Crow the 20th Century before the Civil Rights Movement in Houston than almost any other city because of what we've done here. It shows by where our students have jobs.

NG: In doing these interviews it appears in some ways that the successes that have been made in terms of diversity are due to individual actions and individuals who put pressure, do you think that's...?

JP: I would agree with that.

NG: ... that's accurate.

JP: I would think in History it was a matter of getting the departments attention, the History Department wasn't opposed to this they were just, they were in paths pointing in other directions the traditional, French historian dies, you hire a French historian. You know just replicate your department and this required adjustments and I do think, I'd say I was very fortunate I came here at 37 years old with one of the better funded chairs on the campus. So I didn't have to get up and make speeches. I could say, "I'm going to do this" and I could support you know three graduate students at once if I wanted to. So I could do, I could as an individual I could just make my own change if I wanted to. I did and a lot of good people in the department were kind of doing the same thing without the resources I had. So that's one thing that Magner was a hero to a lot of us because he actually said, "This is important here's the money" as opposed to, "You're right go and get it if it's important." And you know resources helped. Joe Glathaar was an important part of this particular in Mexican American History. The way this works so Joe's the

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chair of the search committee that found either Louis Alvarez or Raul Ramos we were looking for a long time when a really good old colleague named, well before Raul that was one job so and my names go crazy Emilio Zamora went to Texas and just got a better job and his wife got a better job and we had a good job to fill so somebody we found two good people and went and asked for the second job and it worked. It doesn't usually work but in the process Joe had found Monica Perales finishing up her dissertation at Stanford but not finished and he just kept talking about her. "You should see this woman. She's from El Paso she's this great..." so she got on our radar and we just kept talking to her and then two or three years later we hired her. It is aggression and it is individual who keep an eye out. I did... that's a fair comment about the University. I've read the interviews and I know what they are saying.

NG: So then my question is if that's the case then are the dangers that once these individuals are gone then were does it leave the situation of diversity?

JP: What you hope is that we've pushed the University along and that new people will pick up the cause. I certainly, in CLASS it certainly matters that we've hired a black Dean who is roughly my age and has lived in the deep-south growing up and stuff and this issue isn't something that's negotiable to him. Our new Dean will be the most supportive Dean CLASS has ever had on these issues. We'll have to look for new ways to do this and they've got to be legal and they've got to be fair and they've got to be opportunity for everybody and all that but it's...I think in CLASS you can see the change already just a little more attention by a little more people. The thing that we don't understand yet is why so many people left, so many promising young minority faculty and a lot of times it's just a lot better offer but one of the... there's a diversity committee

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in CLASS right now that I'm on and one of my jobs that you've done for me is to interview clusters of the faculty that were particularly aggressive and now we're going to at least do phone interviews with people we've identified who've left who we recruited and then who went somewhere else and just ask why? It's weird when we don't do that when people leave so we just ask, "What could have been done better?" A little different.

NG: So in terms of keeping the momentum going of diversity where do you stand on how that gets done or where does pressure need to come from certain people?

JP: You know if I'm honest with myself my stance is right now it's going to be somebody else. I've paid my dues, I've done my work and what I've promised myself is that I'm going to be a scholar of energy until I get out of here and retire and maybe have four or five years where I focus on my own research. I haven't paid a cost because I've done my stuff and written books, but I just in teaching and energy I really wanted to get to this great point in our history where we have to decide about what to do with energy supply and I know a lot of stuff about it and I want to spend whatever I have inside of me doing that. That won't mean I'll stop. One thing that's great, now we have graduate students all over the world who are professors who will send us students all over the country. So I'll keep doing that but I think sooner or later you finally say, "That's 30 years on the job I think I'm ready to try and figure out other things about my own life." I hate to even say that out loud. I've never said that out loud but that's what I chose when I took this new job with the Provost that deals with energy. I just really want to see what level I can put this together if this is what I do. So...

NG: It seems that history stands out, the History Department stands out as a model for increasing diversity...

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JP: I think it does yeah.

NG: ...on the faculty and graduate students. How do you think that happens in other departments?

JP: I think the biggest problem is they don't have such a direct tie to the job market as we do. There's not a, African American engineering position advertised although some companies still will look aggressively for minority engineers. But I think just in terms of basic research we had a real advantage. The other thing we did and this is good. This I've tried to get, I've tried to take this when I was Dean for a year. We had money (some of it was mine some of it was other people's) and we started sponsoring these African American, Mexican American history workshops (you might have gone to some of the early ones). And we'd bring a dozen or so of the best young people in the field to U of H every May and they would see us and we'd get to know them and just build goodwill. The other thing however this happened and to give a lot of credit where a lot of credit's due and the Mexican American History, the Center for Mexican American Studies had a post doc and Tatcho Mindiola I think saw many of us in history as people of really good will on this topic and he started spending his post doc on us regularly and it helped us recruit incredibly good people. We could hire Monica Perales, I don't know if she got one of them because I think she got one in Dallas that's separate but we could hire a young faculty members and say, "Your first year you are a post doc worke on the book and then you'll come onto the faculty and you will have a giant leap towards tenure." That was Tatcho's money and he's done really good at that, spectacularly good.

NG: One of, I mean everybody mentions that the thing that is needed for increasing diversity is funding at all levels.

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JP: You know that's what I just realized I've said 10 times, if you say, "What's the key thing?" It's individual participation of people concerned, it's mainly money. You can buy this and the problem with U of H is we can't outbid a Stanford or an Ivy League school or even University of Texas in terms of what we offer graduates we just can't. We don't have the funds. And I've advocated not just on minorities but on the best faculty we can find that we're going to have to have particularly good package for entry level professors we're going to have to have differential and for graduates differential salaries and differential graduate packages for the extremely good people out there or we will never get them. Extremely good white to whatever and that's the biggest dilemma facing U of H and then keeping. I think the common answer to the minority factor that left will be, "It's such a better job and I went to a more prestigious university and I teach less and I have better students I have better, more funding for research." We have a hard time competing. Give us some money. That money helps. I think that's one of the great privileges I had. I had Hugh Roy Cullen God bless his soul. The money keeps flowing from the past to me and I keep putting it out there. So it's good. I've never given you money? I've given you money now!

NG: What about diversity in administration?

JP: It's been a long road and that was those early committees that I, the first committee that I was on was to address that issue. There was not, there was not a top level minority administrator on campus in the late 80's and Elwin in particular was really concerned with that. He was a lawyer and he knew the law. So not so good, not so good historically and yeah I think that John Roberts is the first African American Dean, there haven't been a lot of women deans. That's... all that's changing suddenly. Two or three

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women Deans just popped up and the chairs have popped up in the last year. I'm including our new Business Dean who's going to be incredibly good. I do think really that the academics is much more a meritocracy much less of a of a barriers to people and on the other hand much less of affirmative action mentality too and that's a great, that's pretty good I mean change speaks to that is pretty good where you have choices when you need a new dean and the choices if you are color blind you chose the right person you will walk in and get diversity also, a lot of that is changing the whole university training system. We can finish this another time go ahead and ask the last question.

NG: The last thing I was going to ask you about is recruitment, do you think that one of the things that can be done is recruitment efforts at all different levels at targeting people because you mentioned an increasing Mexican American graduate students that you've had...

JP: From where they are. I think that's something we started to learn and we need to get back and learn more about that and then we have to spend money, faculty have to be willing to spend their time and somebody has to pay for their trips. We were pretty good about that about 10 years ago in History and it really paid off. You're not talking about finding 300 employees. You're talking about finding two or three really good graduate students a year and one faculty every five years and you change a department just like that in historical time. And you have to, a lot of it is just time, who will go down to Pan America and spend, fly down and spend a day and a night and talk to students they don't know and who may never come here and we had people who would do that. Yeah I think that was on the old days that was just called expanding the pool when everybody knew it was the most important thing we had to do and still, it's still important it's easier now to

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pool has expanded permanently a bit. But again if you are U of H you have to hustle more than schools with prestigious names. [] (33.24) can recruit anybody and if we want to say we are tier one then that means we're getting really good students and we're going to have to start competing a little more aggressively paying more and doing all kinds of things. And keeping... and you know in fact we don't like to hear this we are by nature and particularly in the liberal arts we are uncomfortable with six hour discrepancies but that's just reality in a capitalistic society. If you have really good people and they have options and you want to keep them you're going to have to pay them. You are going to have to come toward what these other schools can do and we are doing that slowly. It's all you can do with the resources you have. You can spend them and try to get more. Do you have much left?

NG: Not much.

End of Interview