Oral History Project

Oral history interviews for Burton A. Weisbrod were conducted by the UW-Madison Oral History Project in 6/15/1990.

This interview is listed as Oral History #471 and the master files of the Oral History Project contain the following:

Paper Archival Resources:
- Release Form
- Index
- Transcript

Digital Archival Resources:
- Digital Index
- Digital Audio

To access a general abstract of Burton A. Weisbrod interview, you are welcome to consult the Oral History Project’s website at http://archives.library.wisc.edu/oral-history/overview.html which is searchable by name or oral history number.

To access the paper and digital files of the Oral History Project, please email Troy Reeves at treeves@library.wisc.edu, call us at (608) 262-5629, or visit our Steenbock Library offices.
University of Wisconsin Archives
Oral History Project

PERMISSION-FOR-USE FORM

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Division of Archives
B134 Memorial Library
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

I, Burton A. Weisbrod, hereby give to the University of Wisconsin Archives the tapes of my interview, recorded on June 15, 1990.

Narrator initial either (1) or (2)

(1) The material may be released immediately.

(2) The material is given on the express condition that it is to be sealed, and not released by the Director of the University Archives to anyone other than Oral History Project employees until January 1, _____, without my prior written approval.

Signature of narrator

Signature of interviewer

Address of narrator

Address of interviewer

Birthday

Date of agreement
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON ARCHIVES
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview #471
BURTON A. WEISBROD

WEISBROD, Burton A. (1931-)
Professor of Economics
At UW: 1964-90

Interviewed: 1990
Interviewer: Robert J. Lampman

Length: 1½ hours

Graduate work; Teaching at Washington University; Arrival at UW; Economics of human resources; *Who Benefits from Higher Education in California and Who Pays for It; Disease and Economic Development*; Campus growth during Vietnam era; Student protests; *Altruism, Morality and Economic Theory*; Graduate students; Uniqueness of UW Economics Department; Hiring process.

Because there is an unbound transcript of this interview (26 pages), no tape index has been done. The transcript is available in Burton A. Weisbrod’s folder in the Oral History Project office.
Bob: This is Robert Lampman, I'm going to interview Burton A. Weisbrod. The date is June 15, 1990. The interview is in the Social Science Building. Burton Weisbrod has been a faculty member here since 1964, and his departure for Northwestern is set for next week, so we are catching him on the wing. Burt, you came here in 1964 when you were 33 years old. You had some interesting experiences up to that time. I was thinking we might start off with what you are interested in and what your ambitions were when you came here. But first would you like to tell us a little bit about what you had done before? Your Ph.D. was, of course, at Northwestern; and you had done some teaching and you had worked in the government and so on. Would you like to summarize that just briefly in a paragraph or so?

Burt: Sure. I decided to go to graduate school because I was finding economics fascinating and I had it in mind that I would become a teacher probably at some small college. I had a vision of life sitting around a fireplace on cold winter evenings with a bunch of undergraduates solving some of the great problems of the world. In fact my first teaching job was at such a place, Carleton College, although by the time I got into the job market I had become more interested in research and was a bit put off by the thought of going to a school with 700-800 students and a town of 5000. Right from the start of my graduate school days and my interest in economics, I was very interested in social welfare issues. Even as an undergraduate I go interested in trade unions and their role in the economic system. One of my earliest interests was in some of the more theoretic aspects of the so called new welfare economics, which focused on questions including the so called compensation issue that related to public policy measures which might be deemed to be pareto-efficient, and yet might make some people better off, while making others worse off. So that kind of distributional equity focus was very much on my mind from my earliest
stage and has continued to be to this day. After a couple years at Carleton I still hadn’t finished my dissertation and went on to Washington University in St. Louis. I finished the degree at Northwestern about a year later and continued researching issues in social welfare. My dissertation, which later was published by University of Pennsylvania Press as an economics of public health, well launched my interest in the health economics area. I didn’t want to zero in too much in health economics. It was an extraordinarily narrow area then. There was virtually no one working in it. The only person I knew in economics who was doing anything there was Rashi Fein, who is a little older than I. I remember talking to him and he advised me not to work in the area since there was nobody doing anything. But anyway I found it interesting, I did do the dissertation, and it worked out pretty well. But then I decided to move into some other areas rather than get too much a niche in health and I expanded in the education area while still at Washington U in St. Louis. And I had broad interest from the start. Somewhere along the line I had gotten acquainted with some people at Princeton Industrial Relations section, and was invited to come there as a visitor for a year, that was 1962-63, after I had been at Washington U in St. Louis for 5 years. I had really a very productive time at Washington U. It was a small and on the whole not distinguished department, but I found it to be a place where I was getting a lot of work done and I enjoyed it. Especially as well as like in the city, socially, but that opportunity to spend a year at Princeton was very attractive and Shirley and I decided to take that, fully expecting to come back to St. Louis. Actually I had gotten tenure just before we left. Then expecting to come back, I received an invitation from Walter Heller to come to the Council of Economic Advisers for that next year at 1963-64. Jack Kennedy was President at the time. This was an exciting time in the history of American economic policymaking because this was a time when Heller and others were pushing for big income tax cuts to stimulate the economy. Hearings were being planned before Congress and I was in the position to be covering those hearings and act as
a kind of a liaison between the Council, White House and Congress. That was only one of the many areas that I did cover anyway. The prospect of doing things like this very much attracted me. I was interested in public policy from the start, as I had mentioned earlier. So I had accepted that but expected to go back to St. Louis at Washington U. Then by the end of that year I had got acquainted around the Council with Bob Lampman and got invited to come to Wisconsin to meet people here and, in effect, be looked over as a possible recruit. As a result I was made the offer and did come. At the Council I was doing all kinds of interesting things which really had a great impact on the future career. I use that year as an opportunity to get involved in as many different kinds of things as I could. There was the big Alaska earthquake and I was involved there with the attempts to monitor and perhaps influence inflation in Alaska. I got involved with some issues involving the Food and Drug Administration and their regulation of drugs, and so on and on. So that was a very influential time. I learned a lot about government functions. I learned how many people could take credit for a particular action. This is a good example for me of a public good. All kinds of people would claim that they were crucial elements on some measure going through.

Bob: But nobody claimed responsibility for the Bay of Pigs that had ....

Burt: That was widely disowned. So then I came to Wisconsin. Lee Hansen, who I got to know earlier when he was at UCLA, came to the Council staff half a year after I did and stayed a half a year after I left, also came to Wisconsin. We became very quickly active collaborators in all kinds of ways. We organized the workshop on the economics of human resources, which focused on education and health issues. We developed a new course called the Economics of Human Resources, which continues to be taught to this day.

Bob: But this was all brand new territory for the economics at Wisconsin?

Burt: As far as I know, yes.
Bob: And perhaps it was one of the first in the country. There was something like this at Chicago, I guess, in terms of a workshop. But...

Burt: I don't know. And then not very long later, at the suggestion of Ken Lutterman, who got his Ph.D. in medical sociology and then went to NIMH in Washington. He proposed the idea of our establishing a Ph.D. training program in Economics in Human Resources, which we did. And although that evolved quite a lot in the last twenty some odd years, we still have it today. It has become much more narrow since 1980, focusing increasingly on economics of mental health, having involved from its original much broader economics of human resources focus. In human resources, education and health are the two principal foci. But we also got into other things. I remember the economics of crime, incarceration, and criminal behavior, things of that sort. Together, we were influential in developing how health and education related to manpower training issues which were of considerable interest to a number of people in Industrial Relations. I know Jerry Somers in particular was quite interested in this. He organized the Center for Vocational and Technical Education or Educational Training, I forgot what it was called.

Bob: Big grant from Ford, I think for that.

Burt: Right.

Bob: So this was not labor economics and it wasn't exactly public finance in the old fashioned way of thinking.

Burt: I think that is right. It was and I think that's part, as I look back on it, Bob, I think that was part of the success of the collaboration between Lee Hansen and myself, because he came directly from a labor economics background and thought of himself as being a labor economist. I had originally in my undergraduate days been interested in labor economics but had been turned off of that in graduate school and had gotten really into the public economics area
and was teaching here at Wisconsin largely in the public economics area. So we complemented each other and each brought some strengths to it. Between us we attracted a lot of graduate students. The workshop, I think, was extremely successfully in attracting students, getting dissertations, producing a very stimulating intellectual environment that was exciting to both of us as well as others.

Bob: And the field was growing nationally at the same time along with you guys.

Burt: You had the Journal of Human Resources that was getting started, another indication.

Bob: Jerry Somers was the first editor.

Burt: Now the Poverty Institute was getting started also and the original group that the we old people came to see included Lee and myself and you, Bob, and Harold Watts, Jerry Somers. I think that was the group of five.

Bob: I was going to say Orcutt must have been on the list too. Originally both you and Lee had a foot in the School of Education.

Burt: Yes, we both came with joint appointments, and as I recall it, although economics was our tenure home. In the early years, we were both getting funded half time by the department of educational studies, which was an innovative idea really to kind of build a mini social sciences division within the education school.

Bob: That still flourishes I guess.

Burt: The department still exists. Exactly what shape its in, I don’t know. It went through hard times both because education schools have gone through hard time over the last decade or so, and because its particular character, I think, it was especially hit by research funding cut backs. I enjoyed the associations over there. There were a number of very interesting people and the early days I had essentially a free ride. They weren’t asking me to do any teaching. Some of the
graduate students there, however, did take the human resources course that Lee Hansen and I taught, and I think that was jointly listed. And I think they did regard that as a general contribution to their program. They got, as I recall, increasingly squeezed for space and what was originally a private office for me became a shared office with one other person then a shared office with two other people. And there ability to support me, and this was true for Lee as well, was diminished as they came on harder and harder times. And I increasingly came to feel I couldn't really continue my involvement and eventually choose to resign.

Bob: Now this collaboration that you did with Lee led to a very exciting and well published book about higher education in California. Do you want to tell very briefly about that and how it came to be and what it meant?

Burt: The California Legislature was examining the question of whether they should adopt the policy of instituting tuition at the University of California. There had been some fees, but there was no tuition. They asked Lee and myself to do a study, which eventually took on the title of Who Benefits from Higher Education in California and Who Pays for It. We did this entire study in two months and it was eventually published as a book, though not by the Legislature, but by a commercial publisher. We concluded that, by and large, the public higher education system, which included the University of California system, California State College system, and the Junior College System, was rather regressive in its financial implications because the biggest public subsidies were going to the University of California students and they tended to be the highest income students. And the smallest subsidies were going to the Junior College students and they tended to be the lowest income students. And in between were the California State College students. We documented that and we then proposed a change in the finance system in which two things were to be done. One, tuition was to be established and second, and integrally related to that, an increase scholarship money was to be made available based on need. So the result of
this would have been these two pieces put together that higher income people would have paid higher tuition and not got need based subsidies. Lower income people would have paid the higher tuition but get bigger subsidies. So that would have somewhat turned around what we regard as a regressivity. Ronald Reagan was governor at the time and what ultimately happened was that he used our study to indicate the regressivity of the system to argue for and successfully so, the institution of a tuition schedule. And they did do that but he did not buy our second proposal, which was integrally a part of this, to give need-based scholarship money. So we learned a practical policy lesson here about how one's findings and recommendations could be cut into pieces and particular parts bought and others not. Ending up with a plan which really didn't accomplish at all what we thought was appropriate. It also apparently turned out, I don't think I know a lot of the facts here, that we came to be almost persona non grata in the public higher education system, including here at Wisconsin, because we were seen as evil people for recommending an increase in tuition at public universities.

Bob: And that was a very live issue anyway in the land grant schools to move to some kind of cost related tuition fees.

Burt: Yes. So apparently we got a reputation for trying to undercut what many people associated with public universities regard as an article of faith that the ideal tuition rate was zero.

Bob: Now what does this tell us about how professors ought to handle policy related stuff. Does it tell us anything or is it just a fact of life.

Burt: Carefully. Well I think the lesson is that as long as one talks about, even policy issues, but talks about them in abstract ways that do not seem to have any direct implications for public policy, and as long as one writes for one's colleagues, one is safe. And the more abstract the work, the more theoretic, the less connected with some practical policy issues, the safer one is. When one starts to say something about the real world policy issues and what should be done,
I think one finds that there is another ball game entirely where there are no rules of the game and certainly not the rules of decorum and etiquette and standard of evidence and polite discourse that we find around universities. And I think that was kind of an eye opener for us as we found ourselves being attacked in personal ways and our motives being questioned and so on.

Bob: Now in the health field you also got involved in some controversy in this study about tropical disease problems.

Burt: Yes, this was not terribly many years later. I had been asked by the Rockefeller Foundation to do a study, which eventually came out as a book called Disease and Economic Development. Rockefeller had been, for years, supporting biomedical research on the problems of particular parasitic diseases. They had a medical team on the Island of St. Lucan in the Caribbean. Schistosomiasis was the principal disease involved. They got the idea that they ought to have some economist look into this. Since I had done some work in economics of health, the contacted me to put together a team which included Ralph Andreano, who was working in economic history at the time. I wanted to get somebody to do some economic history of the area as a base for our analysis. Bob Baldwin was involved; he had been interested in economic development issues generally. Allen Kelley, former colleague now with Duke, who was demographically oriented, got some things done on the demographic effects of parasitic diseases. Irwin Epstein who was an education sociologist in the education school and in fact was a colleague of Lee Hansen and myself in the educational policy studies department. Epstein was to focus in on the interrelations between health conditions and education. Well we came out with some results which were based particularly on work that I was doing myself...

Bob: This was a 1974 publication.

Burt: The book came out then but the work was completed by the end of 1969. I had a Guggenheim that year, and went to LSE for 6 months and then to Spain for a few months. The
book came out in 1974, but the work was completed by the end of 1969. Well, somewhere in the next couple of years we were giving talks about our findings. Looking at the effects of parasitic diseases on labor productivity, we found that the more severely infected individual people were with the parasitic disease eggs, the lower was their productivity per unit of time, say per day. But they worked more days so that their overall productivity, at least as measured by earnings, was not reduced, significantly by the disease. And in presenting this at some conferences that included people from AID, which was putting a lot of money into developing countries and also into medical research, developing countries, and in conferences with public health people and the like, we started to get some tremendous flack. People were claiming I didn't know what in the heck I was talking about on this because I am not a physician, or a epidemiologist, or a parasitologist. And then I learned along the way about some big conference being held, very much related to the economic impact of bilharzia, another name given for it. And I was rather shocked that neither I nor anybody else associated with the project was invited to this. It was so obvious that we should be and I did some looking into this and I found out that the reason that I was not invited or anybody else from our team was that the key person organizing this just didn't like our results. My own suspicion was that he just felt very threatened by this. He was getting a lot of research support and our results showed that there was no big impact on labor performance. Then, more-less around that time, I submitted the book manuscript done by the five of us.

Bob: Are you talking about this 1974 date again.

Burt: Right. So it was somewhere between 1970 and 1973. The book manuscript was submitted. The University of Wisconsin Press was having it be reviewed, when another parasitologist, a fellow from Berkeley, wrote an unsolicited letter to the editor to the University of Wisconsin Press saying that he should not publish our book because we didn't know what we were talking about. It was the same kind of argument. Interestingly, he had never seen the
manuscript, but that didn't seem to bother him. And Tom Webb, the director of the Press, to his
credit wrote back a letter to this fellow, he sent a copy to me, a rather prestigious person at the
medical school at Berkeley, either medical or public health, really putting this fellow down, saying
"I didn't ask for your opinion and I don't want it. We will go through our regular review process."
Then the person wrote back again to Webb. Webb wrote an even stronger letter back to him.
But here was another attempt to stifle scholarship, to prevent publication. Even if he had read it,
he didn't have the proper right to do it. But he hadn't read it. But this was a good illustration
together with the earlier one of how when one starts to say things that had policy implications for
how AID spend its money and how individual academics would get research support and the like.
And there was another case of a research project that started to get policy implications, and we
learned there were no holds barred.

Bob: So again you were out on a frontier of linking up across disciplines and into different
parts of the world. It all sounds very exciting both then and now to me as an outsider of these
adventures of yours. In the mean time, things were changing very rapidly on the campus here.
Can you recall, just to feed you a couple lines here, enrollments were rising very rapidly in the
late 1960s? We had years of turmoil about Vietnam and all sorts of student protest issues. 1967-
1970, at least, were years of turmoil on the campus. On the other hand, we were a very freely
budgeted as compared to other times, we had lots of money, a new building, we were a very
prosperous bunch. And we had a rapidly growing faculty, new subjects and new approaches to
economics were being tried out. Is there anything that you might want to mention about how the
campus was moving and how the department was faring in those days?

Burt: The overall growth of the campus and the growth of the department is worth talking
about a little as is the other thing you mentioned, the relative budget affluence of the times, and
some things related to that. I don't remember the exact campus population size at the time I
came but it must have been in the low twenty thousand range. Evidently it was rising rapidly, I remember it was not many years, maybe just a few years after I came, that people around here were saying that we were moving close to 28,000 and that was an upper limit. The campus should not get bigger than that and hence if it looked as though we would be pressured to get bigger than that, we ought to do something about it perhaps by building another campus out on the west side. In retrospect I am not prepared to say whether it was or was not a good idea to continue growing this campus, but I do feel and I did feel for many years that there was a real down side to the growth. For one thing, the campus felt impelled to go to a faculty senate system rather than a direct faculty voting process. In a sense, few of us want to spend much time in faculty meetings. On the other hand when we were going, it did give more of an identification of the individual faculty member with the University government. I think something was lost when we went to the senate system. As the department got bigger and bigger at the same time, I think there was some loss of identity, an identification of individuals with the collective corporate hold over the department. Turning to the financial side, I think there was a very favorable morale situation in which there was a can-do attitude. There was a view that if we had good things to do, we could get them done. If we needed the funds, the graduate school or the Dean would come through. If there was somebody we needed to hire for good reasons, we could do it. There was a sense of optimism which I think permeated the whole department. It was not a feeling, at least I was not aware of any feeling, of competition among the faculty. It was a feeling that we could all move ahead in terms of areas that we wanted to develop. Whatever it was, it could be done. I think that has changed over the last decade or so.

Bob: Just to quibble a bit, I guess, our conversations were in the last 25 years, always involved this kind of give and take. You mentioned that everything could be done. Well Guy Orchestra found that there were somethings that you couldn’t do about this period.
Burt: Yea, that's very well taken.

Bob: You perhaps were more in the mainstream, more traditional in the kinds of research projects you thought of. He thought of these massive, big team things, across departments.

Burt: I'm glad you raised that.

Bob: But that is certainly an exceptional case.

Burt: Well it is, but I think it is worth commenting on. What I meant in my early remarks was, as you clarified, on small scale things, there was a can-do feeling. If somebody wanted to an individual project and needed a semester off to do it or needed some money for a trip, RA, things of that more traditional amount or sort, I think there was a can-do feeling. And I remember talking to potential recruits about the availability of the graduate school research committee funding, and saying to them that if you needed some money to do something and you had a good case for it, you could get it. So I was thinking in my remarks about these small scale things.

Bob: What about the student turmoil?

Burt: The student turmoil seems to me was a kind of overlay of this enthusiasm and can-do attitude that I was just talking about. It seemed to me that, apart from the obvious concerns a lot of the faculty had about the war in Vietnam and the killings and the whole set of political and humanitarian considerations there, the faculty was very frustrated, unclear what to do, by and large sympathetic with students, frustrated in the effects that the student activism was having with faculty ability to do their research, because they were feeling that the university was by and large supportive and these were good times or would be good times had it not been this, what I was calling this overlay. Clearly some faculty were much more involved than others and devoted more of their time to thinking about strategy for students and strategy for the university than others. I guess I thought that, on the whole, the university handled things pretty well in a terribly decisive time. And I thought that, as far as our department goes, I thought that we came through that
quite well. It was not a time, at least as I recall it, I have selective memory, not a time of great
devisiveness in the department. The department did not produce any kind of a civil war over
policy. Individual faculty sometimes had personal problems, as did some students. I didn’t see it
then nor do I now, as having long range consequences for the department.

Bob: Did you have anything to do with the union of radical economists? A number of our
students were involved and I think some of our faculty members were also.

Burt: Right. I don’t quite know.

Bob: That seems to have vanished from the scene.

Burt: Yes, I think it may still exist. Somehow I did sort of escape that, I don’t know why.

Bob: Well the next thing that followed on to that was the great fiscal austerity. The
Regents got rid of Harrington and all the people who had been on this great expansive move
before. And brought in a new and different scheme with merging of all the universities in the
state. And this austerity hit the department pretty clearly and so some of the can-do spirit seem
to be crimped in the 1970s. But do you want to skip along to your later more mature years of
1980, roughly along that period. Your interests would move off to include nonprofit organizations
and nonprofit schemes of handling economies.

Burt: My intellectual evolution here was something like this. Given the earlier interests I
talked about in social welfare issues, it was natural to think about supplements to the private
market. And, by and large, economists at that time were thinking about government as either the
corrector of private market failures in the efficiency sense, or as correctors of some distributional
malfunction. And through time I became less and less comfortable with this view that there were
really only two institutional mechanisms, the private market or government, for dealing with these
problems. In the early 1970s I began to generalize the private market failures stories to the
government failures stories, under what conditions would government be unable to correct private
market failures. And I was working on a paper in the early 1970s, which was quite important to my future thinking, in effect, on the governmental failures. While I was working on this, there were some drafts around, I guess I had been talking about this, and I got a call from Edmund Phelps of Columbia. They were organizing a small conference I think with Russell Sage support. Would I come and give my paper there? Which I did, it was a very interesting conference. Only about 10 or a dozen people there. Eventually a book was published which Phelps edited call, *Altruism, Morality and Economic Theory*. I think that was published around 1975. The conference was 1973. And that paper led to my thinking about nonprofit organizations as another institutional mechanism in addition to private market and government through which the society might choose to operate. So that has continued, I've done some things on charitable donations and volunteering, related to what I call the institutional choice framework.

Bob: Now again that seems to bridge a couple of fields in our traditional way of dividing up courses. It is partly public finance or public economics but it also sounds like industrial organization.

Burt: Yea, it is. And I think it is true that I like the idea of breaking down barriers, if you will, across fields or building bridges across them, however one wants to put it. For example, some literature has evolved on the so called crowding out phenomena. And that refers to the relationship between what the public sector does and what the nonprofit sector is doing. For example, if government spends more on social welfare does that crowd out the private charitable giving, either in money or in-kind through volunteer labor time. The industrial organization connection is one of increasing interest in recent years. That is looking at so called mixed industries, mixed in the institutional structure. In hospitals, nursing homes, day care centers, and other industries, you have mixtures of private enterprises, private, nonprofit organizations, and frequently governmental organizations. One of the things that I have been hoping to do and try
to make some contributions to is examining the organization of these mixed industries, which in
general, has been outside of the industrial organization area. They tend to look at the private
sector only.

Bob: And the regulated...

Burt: And perhaps government regulation of private industry, but they have not been
interested in what is called comparative institutional behavior. In other words, the question of
whether in mixed industries there is or is not any significant differences in behavior between, say
for profit hospitals and nonprofit hospitals, government hospitals, or nursing homes, day care
centers and the like. This area is getting more and more attention, with a growing empirical
literature as data are becoming more available on mixed industries and also at the theoretic level
on what the role of nonprofit organizations may be, particularly under conditions of informational
symmetry, where outputs are difficult to monitor. My own feeling is that this may be a hand so to
speak through which to cut across the public finance area and the industrial organization area,
and to some extent, labor as well, because the nonprofit organizations get the vast majority of
volunteer labor and volunteer labor is substantially quite important, perhaps on the order of 5
percent of the whole labor force in total hours. And since that 5 percent is overwhelming in the
social service sector, maybe 20-25 percent of the paid labor in that sector. So I think that this
focus on comparative institutional behavior is providing some interesting new research directions
and with some teaching implications too. Two years I did introduce an advanced undergraduate
course on the role of the nonprofit sector in the mixed economy, and that worked out rather well.
It had I think about 20 or so students in it, and last year I taught a little different version of it to
a La Follette group.

Bob: You have had a lot (20 or more) of Ph.D.'s that you are the major professor for, and
some of them have been in one of these fields and some in other, could you roughly categorize
how many have been in this nonprofit field and how many in health or education or is there some other way to break them up?

Burt: I don’t know. I will have to think out loud with you. I am sure that this sort of parallels my own evolving researching interests. There was one big cohort of people involved with public interest law. There was a substantial grant from the Ford Foundation, which itself had been supporting public interest law firms, and the question there was what is the role, or ought to be the role, of these so called public interested supported law firms in the social system. This to me fit in nicely with the work I had been doing on governmental failures because, going into a little technical detail at this point, I saw the public interest law activities as reflecting the failures of government which I saw as responding to more majoritarian kinds of demands through the political system and the I saw the role of nonprofit organizations and public interest law firms were an interesting example of that. As focusing on the minority kinds of interests in collective goods such as the people, let’s say environmental preservationists, who were not numerous enough at least at that time to be carrying a lot of political weight and here it was a public type, collective type good, environmental protection, and there did seem to be an argument along customary lines for trying to something to overcome the free rider tendency that goes along with a public good and leads to underprovision. So I go interested in that. There must have been 4 or 5 students who got to do dissertations that directly or indirectly related to the public interest law activities in various fields.

Bob: So you always had some new things cooking on the burner. New applications in economics.

Burt: Yes, I guess, I have always tried to look at things in different ways.

Bob: Well that is what a professor is for. Somebody said that is how you define a professor. He thinks otherwise.
Burt: And that continues to be true. Always trying to build new bridges across fields and departments. I have had a lot of contact with people in law school here and with people in the school of pharmacy, in the medical school, sociology department, education school. I’ve enjoyed all of those contacts. There is a fair amount of frustration in trying to understand and communicate with people in other disciplines.

Bob: Did you think of Wisconsin as somewhat unique when you first came here or before you came here? And do you still think there is some unique role played by our economic department as compared to other economics department? Or are they all the same?

Burt: Well I think there was something unusual, perhaps unique, about Wisconsin. At the time I came here in 1964, I did not have a lot of basis for comparison. I had been, I had done my graduate work at a quite small department at Northwestern and had gone to an even smaller department at Carleton, where there were only three economists, and then went to Washington U at St. Louis, which was seven or eight. I had visited Princeton, but was only there for a year, and had limited experience there. So when I came here, this was a big department, a first rate department. I did feel it was, I thought it was unusual, from what I knew, in the sense that it was a first class place but a place in which there was an openness, a real openness to ideas, together with a very strong tradition of interest in social welfare issues and relating theory to policy. So it was a kind of environment that I thought would be very nurturing and I would fit into well and I think that was the case. It was also true that, I had been an undergraduate at Illinois at the time that they were having a big civil war in the early 1950s, and I was very sensitive to not wanting to go to a department in which I would have to spend time in combat with colleagues. And at Washington U at St. Louis, which is not a great department but we didn’t have those problems, and I didn’t want to leave one if I was going to go into one that did have those problems. So I asked a lot of questions of all kinds of people who were both here at Wisconsin and who weren’t
and I was assured that this was not the case here. There was harmony and that was important to me. And I came here and that was the case.

Bob: Throughout this period, has it seemed relatively harmonious?

Burt: It was in the early years, at least for a decade or so, there was a general faculty seminar in which there was wide attendance from across fields. Somehow along the line, I think associated with the growth of the department, specialization became greater and greater and we evolved a whole new set of field related workshops and the general faculty workshop has kind of withered away. I think it is all part of a process of growing, specialization, on one hand, and growing insulation of people from others in the department, which became more and more feasible as the department grew in size. You couldn't have a lot of specialization when you had 20 people, by the time you got up to 40 you start to get enough mass that a person could interact with 2 or 3 others and disregard a lot of other people. So I think that through the years, the sense of department and of people trying to keep abreast of what their colleagues are doing has diminished. I suspect in large part because of size. There may have been other things.

Bob: And perhaps reaching out to other departments, even harder hit.

Burt: I think that is right. I think...

Bob: There is somewhat less likelihood that anyone in our group of younger people, younger than you are, who will pick up with the School of Education.

Burt: I think that is right. I think Wisconsin was unusual in the extent to which it was informally possible to establish contacts elsewhere. Contact with education was actually formalized, but as I mentioned, I had a lot of contacts with the law school even though I never had an appointment there, and with the med school, never an appointment there. It was a faculty here that seemed to be very open to interacting with people from other units, and I thought that that was unusual. And I still think as I look back, I have had more experience now with other
places and I think that that was unusual. I think its now less easy to do than it was earlier. I'm not sure.

Bob: Is that because of size?

Burt: Well size is the one thing that I can identify.

Bob: Although when you think about it, presently the department numbers about 40 and at the end of 1950 it was something like 20. So it has doubled, but enrollment in the school have gone up more than that. So its not the biggest thing in the world, 40 people. Although it's twice as big as Minnesota's department.

Burt: Another thing I think that has happened along the way, and I know that this is the case, class sizes have increased markedly, and my sense is that the department faculty have increasingly come to feel overwhelmed by demands of a growing undergraduate body, relative to the number of faculty. I guess not a growing graduate student body, but a large one. There are tremendous demands on our faculty for service course teaching, which is substantial all the time, undergraduate teaching, honors course teaching, graduate teaching. I have a sense of a frustration level that wasn't present 15 years ago, which I think is attributing to some morale problems. And there is also an overlay of fiscal concerns also. I think that this is not any more true of economics than perhaps other departments here, perhaps less so, but the university has gone through an extended period of fiscal stress. The faculty salaries seemingly fall behind, there is a painful catchup exercise with somewhat doubtful effectiveness, and delays and then fall behind again. I think there is a sense of lack of optimism for the future, which I think is in contrast with what I earlier called the can-do.

Bob: That was an interesting phrase and that we were saying really was particular notable in the 1960s. And by 1970 we were into a new period. Maybe there has been another title for the, not the not-can-do, but ...
Burt: But even in the face of the graduate school research committee, I can't anymore say what I said earlier, if you really need some funding and you have a good project you can get it. The research committee, I think, has increasingly felt that it has to spread its resources thinly. I think this is in response to federal research funding cutbacks. For many years it was possible for an active faculty member to get a semester off every three years; increasingly that is not possible. All one can get is summer pay. And I think some will observe some strange feelings among more senior people who have somewhat been squeezed out as the search committee put its resources, or so it seems, into junior faculty. So I do have a sense of some pessimism about the future.

Bob: I wonder how that seems to the very young people, the 25 year olds right now. Do they have a desperate kind of a feeling?

Burt: I wouldn't use the word "desperate." I would rather stick with something a little less shocking, like "concerned". When we were in this can-do phase, we were able to hire anybody that looked good and promote anybody that looked good. And a young person coming here, felt that if he worked hard and was productive, he would get promoted. Well that is no longer the case and it is even less and less the case. We must now be at an all time high, or at least in memory, in the ratio of assistant professors to tenured people.

Bob: The department is more than half nontenured, about half, at this point. That's very unusual.

Burt: Its close to that and its quite obvious to the assistant professors that not many of them are going to get promoted.

Bob: It was just a few years ago the complaint all around was that not only here but all campuses were overt enured. So many people were tenured there were no positions for the young people. But now it is the other way around.
Burt: Well, I think it was 1980 or just about then, that we got down to one nontenured member in the department. And just about a year ago or so, when one assistant professor was turned down, Val Lambson, that hit quite hard and many assistant professors who felt that here was a fellow who was a good teacher with a first rate publication record and they were saying that if he can't make it, it doesn't look good for us. So I think that is changing people’s attitudes. And I also have the feeling, this is hard to document, that with this pessimism, it's not too bad a word. Even among more senior people, there is less of a feeling that people are likely to spend their careers here. And I think that has some impact on the extent to which some people concern themselves with their own more narrowly defined self interest, relative to that of the larger corporate entity called the department.

Bob: One of the things I have been impressed by in looking at this history stuff, is the great number of people who have been on this faculty. As of 1988 there are 506 people who taught or have been on the instructional payroll at ranks of instructor and above. You incidentally were one-half of the way through at 253. That is half of 506.

Burt: Now that is in terms of hiring dates.

Bob: That is chronologically by hiring. And of course you came here when the department was at its peak level. By late 1960s it was at its peak level of 55. So we had a lot of people come here for brief period, as a visitor, with a one or two year appointment, or sometimes for an initial three year appointment and then not get renewed and so on. I always think of you as a good example of why its good for departments to hire people at tenure level. You and Lee Hansen and Jeff Williamson came as associate professors and that was a good arrangement, but we never have been able to do much of that it seems. I don’t know why it has been so hard to do. But any way, you came here and you didn’t have to worry about the tenure decision, it had already been made for you at another school. But a lot of people on this list were people who came here
as their first job and for various reasons they didn’t stay with us. So I don’t know how that may have varied. I guess one could get some kind of an index of mobility and the number of people who really expected ever to be here a long time. When you talk about a department, you tend to think about people who spend their lives here.

Burt: Yes.

Bob: But you are one of a very small number of people who spent more than 20 years. There are only about 60 people who have spent 10 years or more. So it must be, I can figure out a number for you, but I’m sure it must be a very small number out of the 506 here that spent 25 years here.

Burt: Well during most of this period, restating things we talked about before, this was a place where the opportunities to do things seem to be very considerable, notwithstanding what you said earlier about Guy Orcutt. The university, no different than any other university, was never interested in bank rolling some big enterprise. But there was an atmosphere here were I felt that I could reach out in all these directions toward the other departments and schools and find stimulation there as well as inside the department. A lot earlier to work with Lee in particular, and there was a period for a long time that I felt that I could do the things that I felt were worth doing. The support was there, the opportunities were there. I think that somehow the things have...

Bob: I think that one of the things that happened, was you brought people here as part-time researchers who could teach some along the way. They were, what you might call in some other fields, post-doctoral fellows. And that is part of this list, although we don’t list them as post-doctoral fellows, they are listed as visiting assistant professors. So that with a lot of research money and with easy leave policies, we can communicate with a lot of people as partial members of the department, at least for a brief period of time. And that has been our style. Just lots of
people running through here, in and out. Not too many really had tenure hopes, they didn't expect that. They had some other home base, another career line, perhaps. So we had a lot of foreigners from other countries and other universities.

Burt: I think if I am reading you right, Bob, I think you are calling into question the assumption or assertion that I made about extent of permanence of the people, and you may well be right. I don't know. I personally was perhaps, not in a typical situation, but here I was having a lot of intellectually important interaction with people who were here for a long time, including Lee, including yourself, perhaps the two most prominent people on this list. Also including Jerry Somers, before his tragic death. The world as it looked to me with my particular blinders on seemed to involve people who shared a concern about the department, who they acted as if they really cared about the department. They wanted to encourage diversity, but at the same time have a sense of corporate identity. Maybe it didn't look that way to people in other fields where the turnover was greater. In the theory area, as long as I can remember, we have always said we were short of senior theorists. And we have always talked that way, so maybe to someone who came here as a theorist it didn't look that way at all. They just saw the turnover.

Bob: Well certainly in theories of about university government, the department is the key. And exactly what the department is and who spends enough time on the department matters to make good decisions is always open for question. Maybe its just accidental when it happens well or not so well. I think it has something to do with these ratios we were talking about, how many people are not tenured, how many are.

Burt: I think the way we behave it does make it accidental. Whether it has to be that way, I don't know. (Tape Stops) Another thing is, as we understand, is the kind of rotating chairmanship arrangement we have. It certainly is not conducive to thoughtful planning. But by
and large for some years the department chairs have not for whatever reasons played strong leadership roles, even in inviting the faculty to think about some of these longer range issues.

Bob: Well the fashion seems to be to move toward short tenured everything, in administration, deanships should be 5 years and then you are out; I guess that's the fashion. Chancellors, I don't know how long. So there is this notion of 3 years for department chairman and that is thought of as progress away from the old tyrannies that get established with somebody having a long-time role. It certainly changed the whole picture of authority of the individual professor or the individual head of a field or a department.

Burt: I think we understand the dilemma. Certainly none of us, certainly not I, would want to see a department chair that was so strong as to be able to dictate what you or I did or didn't do in research. Nobody wants to go that far. At the same time I think there is a legitimate question of whether to be a completely decentralized as we are at this point either. Whether decentralized decision making by each individual is going to lead to the department "evolving in some mutual direction." There has to be some leadership. Leadership doesn't have to mean dictatorial determination. But the department is a heterogenous group of people who see things differently. I think it takes real courageous leadership to try to get people who value their diversity and who are in fact excellent people to somehow see an ideal department as not consisting of clones of people like themselves.

Bob: One of the things I am impressed by in talking to department members about history here is how often there are people who were here for a period of time and didn't know what I thought everyone knew about say, the squabble over Industrial Relations, or the big problem over the Orcutt organization.

Burt: I think that says something about the extent to which see themselves as part of this corporate identity. I wasn't in the IR, for example, but I knew the people and felt that the issues
were important and interesting, so I paid attention to what was going on. But I bet there were others around who said I don’t really care, let them go or stay, I don’t care one way or the other. So they didn’t pay any attention. Why bother.

Bob: Well I guess that’s true about citizenship in any organization. Lots of people are so busy doing whatever they are doing, they just haven’t got time or the ability to concentrate on other things that are going on around.

Burt: Well sure. I haven’t followed closely the thoughts of the econometricians in the department as to the needs of the econometrics school. They may see some important issues there which I am not aware of.

Bob: Maybe leadership starts with the individual level. You get people like you with enthusiasms for particular lines of new research, new instruction, and the administrative people can help or discourage some of that. And that is leadership of a kind. I think that in universities that’s what most of the progress is, it’s individuals who want to do something. And some can-do administrator says ok you can do that. And then we will keep rolling on and there will be somebody else next year. But you can get into situations where there just isn’t any room to operate that way. You’ve got to keep everybody doing what they were doing before, you can’t release anybody.

Burt: Well maybe another way of saying that is that there are times perhaps when the opportunity costs seem more up to par for doing something.

Bob: Yea, if we let people go on leave too much, there are opportunity costs there.

Burt: Right you encourage, support somebody who wants to try to develop something new, some new course. And that means you aren’t able to get the staff teaching some other course that is very much needed. You get a lot of flack. There are times like this.
Bob: Well I hate to think that this is one of the last times that you and I will have a chance for a free wheeling conversation like this. We have had a lot of them. But this started out to be an interview of you in your last days. Any more you want to add, Burt, any question we haven't touched on yet, maybe.

Burt: Only that I think you have done a terrific job. I think you should get a radio program. You asked good questions. You gave me a chance to talk.