

University of Washington Tacoma Oral History: Founding Stories

**Narrator:** Donna Kerr  
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**Joan Hua 0:00**

**Let me just confirm once again, Donna, is it okay that we're recording this interview?**

Donna Kerr 0:05

It is indeed.

Joan Hua 0:06

Thank you. This is Joan Hua with the UW Tacoma oral history project. And today I am online with Donna Kerr. And we're recording this interview remotely in our respective homes in Seattle, Washington. Today is July 24, 2020. And let's start.

Donna, can you begin by introducing yourself and maybe talk a bit about your family background?

Donna Kerr 0:37

About my family background? Ok.

**Joan Hua 0:39**

**Just for some personal context.**

Donna Kerr 0:43

Well, my family background. So I grew up in Kansas, in north central Kansas, in a little rural community called Washington, Kansas. And to make a long story very short, went to the University of Kansas in undergraduate and for some master's work in history, and then did my doctoral studies, PhD, at Columbia University. And that was after having studied in Paris, and then sojourned in Alaska, across the years I have studied languages as well as philosophy and so have lived in Paris and Vienna and Moscow at different points. But my career has been almost exclusively, was at the University of Washington. And now we say in Seattle, although we used to say just the University of Washington, where I landed, right after I completed my work at Columbia University in 1973, as an assistant professor. The only time I left the university was I took a leave of absence to go to the Institute for Advanced Study. I was a special

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assistant to the director for research and corporate affairs. But then during that year, George Beckman, who was provost of the University of Washington at that time, recruited me back to the university. And so with him as provost and Bill Gerberding as president, I returned to the university to serve as Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. And at that time, that was the highest rank a woman had ever had in the central administration of the university. So that kind of special. I liked that fact.

So I was at the university until I retired in 2011, after 38 years on the faculty. And so while I was in the central administration, I still had a faculty appointment of course, and after I did service as the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, and then the point person for planning for new campuses and then the developmental dean for the new campuses. That's the point at which I went back on the faculty, which had always been my intent, for another 20 years or so and before I retired. Does that respond?

**Joan Hua 3:56**

**Yes, thank you. So just to clarify, what year did you become the vice provost?**

Donna Kerr 4:04

That was I think 1983.

**Joan Hua 4:11**

**And then that was around the same time that the Washington state legislature established the Higher Education Coordinating Board. Is that right?**

Donna Kerr 4:23

I think that it had been there under a different name, but it became the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the HEC Board, it was referred to. I think before that, there might have been an earlier version prior to my time.

**Joan Hua 4:49**

**Can you kind of describe the landscape of higher education at that time for me a little bit as an expert in educational policy around the mid-1980s? What was higher education like in Washington state and what was the significance of the HEC Board?**

Donna Kerr 5:11

That's an excellent question, and sadly, there is a really obvious answer. It was the early '80s, some in the '70s and then the early '80s, it was a very difficult time financially for the university because of the taxing structure of the state whenever there was an economic contraction. This meant that social services and education, K-12 education and higher education, all had to compete for shrinking funds, which is not a happy situation. So the tension within higher education in the university regarded severe underfunding. And so for example, compared with our, in our comparison group nationally at that time, the UW faculty was just grossly underfunded. And the kind of joke was that, well, Mount Rainier, that view counted for a lot of

money. Well, that is a joke, but, so it was, though the environment here was lovely. And I will say that was a part of my ex's and my decision to move to Seattle rather than take another opportunity. So that, I would say, above all else, is a dynamic that has to be held clearly in mind when thinking about the fact that there was interest in trying to serve more people in the state of Washington in higher education.

**Joan Hua 7:12**

**And then so what was the role of the HEC Board?**

Donna Kerr 7:15

Well, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, its function was to make, as I understood it, was to make recommendations to the legislature. If I recall, I think it was appointed by the governor. And at least this is my impression and memory. And it was to make recommendations to the legislature and in particular to the joint education committees. Because, you know, I could see how that the need to coordinate demands from higher education was there, and so, with that in mind, that maybe gives a context for the call for looking at needs in higher education the state might have.

**Joan Hua 8:24**

**And the idea is then ... was there a plan, sort of, to mitigate the challenges with funding in order to meet the needs or demands for education better?**

Donna Kerr 8:48

I'm a little reticent to characterize what was going on, and I think probably legislators and people serving the HEC Board could give you a clearer answer. I can give you my impression as someone who always went to HEC Board meetings from representing the university, just to be there and to offer resources as wanted and to keep track. The desire was to do planning that over time could respond to the need for higher education in the state. Now, I think it was, nobody, probably no one thought that the legislature was just going to fund any need there might be because the budgets were tight. The economy was not flush. But I think it was a very foresightful thing to establish the HEC Board to try to give some careful, deliberate thought to what resources and distribution of resources might be put into higher education in the state, and the quality of appointees to the HEC Board was also remarkable. So I think that was a foresightful thing to do. And without that, I think the state would have been ill served.

**Joan Hua 10:38**

**You were the vice provost, and then you were appointed by the HEC Board to study the needs of higher education in the state—is that correct?**

Donna Kerr 10:50

Not exactly. No. The HEC Board asked the University of Washington to undertake a study that would try to define the need for higher education at the upper-division level. And that may sound like a very hyper specific thing without cause, but it's not. The state had invested earlier a lot of

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resources in developing a very broadly dispersed community college system that at the time had 27 campuses. And community college being two years, the thought was, "Oh, we've done that. So now we're probably missing," and it wasn't an unreasonable thought, "Maybe we're missing additional opportunities for, say, doing baccalaureate degrees at the upper division." So I was interested in knowing: what is the need at the upper division in the state of Washington? And so the university—and it also makes sense they would ask the university with research resources and, you know, a history of being a research university to take that on. And I was asked by the president and provost to lead that effort in my role as the Academic Vice Provost. So I was not personally asked; the university was asked.

**Joan Hua 12:42**

**Okay. Can you talk about why you personally, though, were interested in taking this on when you were asked by the provost?**

Donna Kerr 12:58

Well, there are two or three reasons that were salient at the time. One was: already in my role, at the provost's urging, I had done a lot of liaison work with community colleges, and even meeting with leadership of K-12 in the state, to try to make sense of: how could we better serve, as a university, serve the state? Are there things we could do? And so already I was in a role where I was meeting with people, talking with people about those general issues. And so asking me, from their perspective, sort of made sense because I was in a way already beginning to do that job, but we didn't have the task at the time or the resources.

And from a personal point of view, it was sort of, it was like the most wonderful thing that could be at handed to me because as a philosopher who has always cared deeply about educational policy, to be asked to coordinate a study that would tell us what a need is for higher education—there was no, it was a wide open question—what is the need for higher education, the upper division, in the state of Washington? I mean, no one really thinks about that. So it was an exciting question because it is wide open, and I cared deeply about doing whatever I could do to provide a databased picture that would enable the state then to make some smart decisions. Not a political decision, not an economic decision, but an educational decision. What if we took seriously meeting the educational needs of the state in higher education? Well, what information would you need? And so, for me as an academic, who cares—I suppose if there's any one institution in the society that has my attention more than any other, it is education. And so this really mattered deeply to me in a personal way. And for that reason, I had just almost unbounded energy for it.

**Joan Hua 14:45**

**Thank you. So that's interesting that it's such a wide open question. And then you have a report that was produced. Can you kind of, if you can remember, summarize what you found and what you sort of found surprising, or what was already expected?**

Donna Kerr 16:22

Well, I think what makes sense maybe first is to talk about the process we used, because I knew, and this is so important to understanding the acceptance of the report down the line. I was concerned that we, whatever data collection we do, how we design the study, that that will all be done—and the term I used at the time, oh, this is fun to remember these things, the term I used at that time, and it gained salience, was, the work we were doing was in a glass house. So we pulled together people who cared about these questions, from the HEC Board, from the community college system, from private schools and colleges in the area, from, I mean, all sorts of people who might have interest we brought to the table to run by possible questions that we would try to address in the study and design, and as we went along, we had to narrow the group to people who actually knew and understood research design, but it was, I thought, you know, even though I'm excited about this being collecting good data, I knew I didn't know enough myself to do this on my own. So I was not doing the study. I was coordinating the study that involves tapping tremendous resources across the state and actually the country, calling on this person or that person to, "How do you think about this?" And so, but we couldn't just do that by ourselves. We had to do it in a way that everyone who had an interest could say, "Oh, yeah, I've had input, and I see what they're doing. It makes sense." Or if it doesn't make sense, tell us it doesn't make sense. So to me, it was hugely important that we have—I don't want to say buy-in; that's too strong—that we have all of the interested parties, anyone with any kind of legitimate interest and understanding about how to pursue these questions, to have them at the table. And while some may say, "Well, that slowed the process," from the first, that was probably the most important move we made to give the report the substance and credibility that it needed, credibility it needed in the broader political context.

**Joan Hua 19:25**

**Yeah, thanks for talking about the methods and the design of the study first. And then, can you describe what you found during the study?**

Donna Kerr 19:40

Okay, so the study had—and I'm doing this from memory. I don't have anything in front of me, but I think I can get it pretty right. The study had a number of parts that were, as I look back, impressive.

One is, in addition to looking at data, like the numbers of people completing degrees, the percentage of the population with this or that degree, and so on and so forth, that kind of thing that you can read off existing data, we did interviews with CEOs who represented over a quarter of the workforce in the greater Puget Sound area. We weren't looking at the whole state for that part of the study but looking at the central Puget Sound, which is basically the four-county area. And because we wanted to know, even though the university is not a job factory, and that's not the point of it, it's still important to know and to appreciate what needs there are in the workforce. And so, that was a study that was huge in a way. And we also did interviews with, it was, 4000 or 5000 people. And by we, I'm saying we hired people to do this or that part of the study. And we had demographers looking at projection. I chose two demographers, who had

very different ideas about: what possibly would be the future population wise of the central Puget Sound in 25 years, say? One was very conservative, and the other was much more flamboyant. And so by having these two demographers whose views were always in this wonderful tension, I felt we were getting, we were bracketing data.

Because part of what we were having to do and decide in this study was to project not what the need was in 1987 or '86, but what the need would be, say, 25 years out. Because if you're building institutions, that's just a blink of an eye. But if you get it wrong, you get it really, really wrong. So that was exciting. And had we with one over the other and not had the second view, we probably would have made mistakes. And I think we avoided a lot of mistakes because of it. So that's another aspect of what we did that was important.

Now, what we found from all that—and this was not a study that had an answer that was waiting for justification. We didn't know when we set out what to expect. But as we went along in the study, and we narrowed down to the central Puget Sound with greater clarity, we needed them to figure out: if you're going to have more opportunities at the upper division available, where would you put them? Well, you got to put them near where people are, looking at what the projected population growth would be. And there were some interesting things in trying to figure out where. Well, if you would put one campus in place—and this is, at the time when we were looking at this in, let's say, 1987 or 1988—if you had one upper division campus, it would be precisely on Boeing Field, because as it turned out, for the four-county area, Boeing Field was the center of the population as adjusted for the transportation system, which meant at that time highways, basically. If you were to select, if you thought you would need two campuses and make it more available that way, one would be in the Bothell area. And at that time, no one—many people didn't even know where Bothell was. I mean, certainly people in Bothell did, but it was not a well-known spot. And the other—if you have two center points in this oval, the other one would be Tacoma. So those were the two population and accessibility centers. And if you would have had a third, it would have been—so you think of three centers, that would have been in Bellevue or in the Bellevue area.

And so we ran numbers for all three, and you really couldn't justify a third campus with the more conservative numbers, and we went with, we didn't go with the flamboyant ones. And I will say that, all along, when we were doing this, I wanted to add also, that as our results rolled in, we shared. We wanted to share them with all of the parties. So, for example, private colleges and universities. We thought it was important that they have data, so that they, too, would know what to count on as they're trying to plan because an important percentage of persons in this area were served by private schools and colleges, and the state would need to rely on that continuing to happen. So this is not, "Let's have the state take on all the new need," but, "Let's share the data so that everybody knows what the picture is." And everybody's been involved from the start, so that they can trust what the findings are.

**Joan Hua 26:39**

**And can you talk about how people were receiving those data? Or maybe if you had public hearings or media responses, that sort of thing, can you talk about how people were anticipating the conclusions or responding to some of the data that you were sharing?**

Donna Kerr 27:05

Right. Well, it was, as you can imagine, it's no surprise to us that when the report was released, and I'm—I'll use a strong word—I'm really proud of this, that nobody seemed to be caught off guard, that it was sort of a nod of the head. Ah-huh. Yeah, there was a lot of interest. And in particular, the community groups that had formed around, in Tacoma, who wanted a campus there no matter what, and I can understand that, because they felt a need. And there was an east side higher education committee, not specifically connected with Bothell, but just east side, and they, too, were feeling the need for more opportunities. That was more a group in the business community who were seeing they weren't able to hire people they wanted to hire. And of course, that wasn't our problem. That wasn't our focus. But understandably, they had interest in that.

So we tried to keep, how to say, one of the enjoyable parts of this work was, I got to go around and do breakfasts all over the place and lunches with groups, from Rotarians to Chamber of Commerce groups. I basically tried to respond to any community group and service organization that was interested, because it was in our interest to explain where we were, what we were doing as we went along, and to hear any concerns that would bubble up. And we met with the press regularly and tried to keep them updated. So I am proud to say that our team, what we produced did not seem to generate any surprises. It's not that everyone was happy with it. There was a senator on the east side—the east side of the mountains, that is—who didn't like the idea that what we were recommending is that there be new campuses in the central Puget Sound. And I can understand, you know, everybody works from a position of dynamics, and that's not what he wanted. But when we would go down to testify, and I was often on the team that did that, to testify in the legislature, I was very clear in my own mind that I had to stay close to the data. Because that was my job. My job was to be clearly focused and to lead our team. Our team's job was to stay focused on the educational need. And yes, there would be economic impacts, and yes, there would be political impacts for this or that person, but—and I liked this about the project—I was in a position to hold clearly to being the voice for the educational need. And I tell you as someone who loves education as an institution, it was like I'd gone to paradise.

Joan Hua 31:01

**So you already brought up that there are these different groups in the community. Some of them are very, had a very strong presence, whether from the business sector or political, and some of them had—and even just from our other oral history interviews conducted—some of them had already very clear or strong ideas about where the campus would be, especially in Tacoma, starting in even as early as the late '70s or early '80s. For example, there's Fred Haley in the business sector in Tacoma, who was interested in the University of Tacoma as opposed to a branch campus. And there was**

**the Executive Council with business leaders like Bill Philip, who were interested in the business side of the implications of having a university there. So, can you talk about to what extent those interests hindered or supported the study effort?**

Donna Kerr 32:19

I'm going to be careful how I say this. Not because it's dicey. But Fred Haley, for example, is always supportive of—he understood—Fred's a smart man. He understood the need to get clear about what the educational need was. And he said, "Over time, there will be a need for a four-year university." That's not what our assignment was. Our assignment was to look at upper division. And you know, there were some—yeah, there were mistakes in some of the premises as to how we were given that particular assignment, but that wasn't ours to change. For example, the request was to try to assess what the need was for upper division, additional upper division opportunities in the central Puget Sound—for the state in general and central Puget Sound in particular. The rationale for that was that, "Well, we have all these community colleges. They can take care of the first two years. And we don't have the upper division." Well, it didn't take long searching through the data to learn something that was jaw dropping: at that time, and I can't tell you what it is now, but at that time, only four percent of community college graduates went on to get baccalaureate degrees. It was not a pipeline to a baccalaureate degree. Now, we could say, "Oh, that's because the opportunities aren't there." But four percent? I mean, and it varied widely. Some campuses sent a lot more on to baccalaureate degrees, but community colleges at that time were not especially focused on academic AA degrees. So there's a way in which one could go back and say, "Oh, it was a flawed study. It was the wrong question." But we had the question that was put to us. And was Fred Haley right, that in time, there would be a need for a four-year university in Tacoma? Right. In the mid-1980s, was that the case? No, it wasn't. So Fred was both foresightful, and I don't think he was disappointed. And he and I could agree that over time, that's going to happen. So no, I wouldn't say that Fred or anyone else with interest in Tacoma, who would have done something a little differently, they weren't wrong. They just had a different set of interests, and the work we were asked to do did not support doing what he wanted to do. But I don't think he was disappointed in the results.

**Joan Hua 35:33**

**I'm interested still in the assignment that was put forth for you to study upper division. I guess I just want to follow up and ask if you think it had to do with the fact that the community colleges would—it was kind of a, more like a political calculation, because community colleges would oppose the establishment of a four-year university. And so it would make it more feasible if there was only focus on upper division?**

Donna Kerr 36:10

That's a great question. I simply don't know the answer to that. I mean, if I had been sitting in the position of the HEC Board, I might have thought, "Oh, well this would be a nice way to bring a really good and pressure to bear on the community college system to follow the lead of some such as Shoreline was always strongly academic." And, you know, some more than others. And

so had I been on the HEC Board, I might have wanted to make that same assignment for political reasons to try to help change the drift of that sector of higher education. And one could also say, "Well, if you don't have the opportunity to upper division, how's it going to help to produce, to support more academic associate degrees?" Maybe it wouldn't have. So I wouldn't score them on that. It was just the dynamic that was set up at the time.

**Joan Hua 37:34**

**Okay, yeah. And then you mentioned Fred Haley. I'm curious, have you also interacted with other folks? Did you meet, for example, Ryan Petty or Bill Philip?**

**Donna Kerr 37:51**

Ryan Petty, yes. And Brian Ebersole and Barbara Bingham. And Liz Heath. I'll tell you the reason I have not been naming names here is because I'm very aware that we have a tendency—we, it's a societal tendency—to attribute successes to individuals. And I think that's good; people make a difference. I mean, Fred Haley pulled people together in his Almond Roca factory. We used his conference room, and that's important. And at the same time, I want to say that there's a history to be written from the dynamics of the time. For example, if you don't understand how underfunded higher education—and in particular research university—was in that time, you can't make sense of a lot of the dynamics, even objections amongst faculty in the University of Washington against taking on new campuses. For that to make sense, you have to understand how strongly that was felt. And so that's, as I was waiting to come on this call this morning, I thought, you know, I want to focus here on the dynamics and tensions that were in place at the time. And in a way we as actors come on that stage and do what we can do, but none of us is, you know, maybe we, maybe with our energy and interest we tweak the course of history a little bit, but it's those general dynamics that I think we often fail to attend to.

**Joan Hua 40:08**

**Yeah, thanks for saying that. And it's interesting because as I've been doing this oral history project, people would ask, like, "Are the narratives aligning?" Or, "Who are the 'founders?'" And that sort of thing. And yeah, people are interested in knowing about the individuals. And oral history as a format is very focused on individual stories. So I appreciate your emphasizing that there's the general dynamics and contexts that need to be considered.**

**And I'm also interested in the curriculum and how these needs inform that. So, as you know, when the campus was established, at least at UW Tacoma, the first program was Liberal Studies, and the initial founding faculty were mostly from interdisciplinary or humanities backgrounds. And that seems to be slightly different from some of the needs named in the report for the study or articulated by some of the community members, that they wanted something with a tech or engineering focus, or business focus. How much did you look into the curriculum design when you were doing the study? And how do you see that progress, going from the needs to starting with the Liberal Studies program?**

Donna Kerr 41:54

That's a great question, Joan. The short answer is that if you're going to begin a university campus that will be freestanding in an academic sense, reliant in the unseen—common library system and many common things which enables a large university to set up a branch without the expenses, if you're going to just set up an independent university, or even an independent upper-division school. So if it's going to be a university, you can't start with a technical college. You can't start with a freestanding business school. I mean, even at the upper division, you have to have the liberal studies. And *liberal* has gotten so misunderstood of late, I'm almost hesitant to say it, but it's a breadth of studies that allow you then from that to build out specialized schools. So if you have that, then you can add a nursing program, then you can add a business school, then you can add technology degree, so. But you have to have the core to start with, or you're not a university, even if you're doing it at the upper division and beyond. So that's why we started with liberal studies faculty on both campuses. It was with in mind—and you can see that in the report—that over time, the other schools and colleges, one could take a degree in something other than liberal studies, but over time. Does that make sense?

Joan Hua 42:42

**Yes, that does. Yeah. I guess essentially my question was, kind of: is that contradictory? But you kind of explained they're not all happening at the same time.**

Donna Kerr 44:26

Yeah. Would some people, especially the east side group, have preferred that we'd be able to start with a full-fledged, university-looking place with a business school? For sure. But was that practical, given the political context? I mean, there was also, as we set out to make specific recommendations, and staying in touch with—I wanted to be mindful of the political context and the economics of this from the legislative point of view. There's no way there were the funds to start universities from scratch and of that expanse, of that latitude. It would not have been possible. Even thinking about 13 faculty members at each of the new campuses, plus the infrastructure tie into the main campus, that was about as much expense as the legislature could take on politically.

Joan Hua 45:52

**And so after the conclusion of the study, there was still, I guess, debate, as I understand, between whether Washington State University or University of Washington would have branch campuses where. And can you talk about that, especially for Tacoma? Washington State University—and Sam Smith, the president at the time—was pretty interested in establishing a branch campus there. And how did that become a University of Washington branch campus?**

Donna Kerr 46:37

My understanding, which is fuzzy, always was fuzzy, because I thought it was irrelevant, was that there was a story—and I don't think it's apocryphal; I think it actually happened—that Sam Smith took a helicopter ride around Tacoma and that the idea was he was looking for a place to

put a branch campus of Washington State University. And, but I tell you, the timing of that preceded the Higher Education Coordinating Board's requesting the University of Washington to undertake a study. So that was not a part of the dynamic I was facing. That was something, I think, in part with higher education being financially in such a precarious position in the state and the president of Washington State going around showing interest in expanding, putting the campus here and there. My guess is, that was part of the impetus behind the formation of the HEC Board in its current form or in its then form, that there needed to be some basis for coordinating and making decisions about the needs other than representatives of individual institutions coming to the HEC Board, saying, "We need this; we need that." Whether it's: we need more money to keep our faculty at the University of Washington, or we need more money to serve people in Vancouver, you know, that Sam Smith was interested in. So that's a set of dynamics that preceded the assignment that the HEC Board gave. So that a step before the beginning of the work we did.

**Joan Hua 49:02**

**Okay. So as the branch campus opened, you were the dean for the branch campuses. And you kind of talked about the logistics of hiring faculty. Can you say more about that and about your role as the dean of the branch campuses?**

**Donna Kerr 49:29**

So the report came out, and I think it was August of '88. And in the legislative session in '89, the legislature mandated that, I believe, in two years the doors would open. That's not what we had in mind. That is breakneck speed, and it's sort of a deep, deep gulp, and of the university made a decision to: "Well, we'll see what we can do, see what's possible to do in that time." And in that time, it could only be possible to open in temporary quarters. That was clear. And the sort of siting decisions would have to wait. And so what the university needed was someone to develop these campuses. There was nothing there. None of this—even though you can see in that report recommendations about curriculum, there was none of the infrastructure. I mean, so then, so for me, this is exciting point, part two. I mean, it was a new point of excitement.

The first one was: my goodness, how on earth do you figure out what need there is for higher education at a certain level, in a certain context, state of Washington, the central Puget Sound? I mean, I didn't know how you figured that out; very few people in the country figured that out. And now this time, there was another open-ended question, but it was sort of: this opens in two years! And, you know, how do you do that? It's kind of fun to see—well, how do you do that? And we knew everything had to happen fast. So the permanent siting had to wait. So we were in a business, stripmall kind of place in the Bothell area, and in Tacoma in a building that we chose downtown. Guess why? Because it had been a place that had presses in it, I guess. So there the load each, that the—

**Joan Hua 52:05**

**—Floor.**

Donna Kerr 52:05

—floor could take was higher than usual, so you could have library stuff there. I mean, so I believe it was called the Perkins Building. It's coming back in my mind. The Perkins Building. It was sort of, "Oh, there's a place!" And so our siting people were, we were just looking for: what's practical? What could be done that's roughly in the area, and then questions about, okay, how do you figure out—? We already figured out there needed to be liberal studies, but how do you set up a process that's going to generate, that's going to bring you appropriate faculty? We were just thinking about the hiring decision. And I'm jumping to that because that's down the pipe quite a bit, but how do you do that? Well, we had to come up with an unusual approach that fit the moment and gave us a whole lot of information.

So rather than advertising 26 positions, we advertised for liberal studies faculty, and with counsel from the Seattle campus, we figured out what kinds of backgrounds we'd need to cover in order to make a liberal studies degree. And then we brought people in in waves. So that we did an interview process that had people not coming in individually but in groups of 12. And so we were interviewing at the same time. And one of the most fascinating things about this was, when you're interviewing people together, you see how they treat one another. And I can tell you that the UW faculty who were on the search committee—and UW faculty served on the search committees—more than how an individual responds to you on an individual question, you watch how they treat one another. And where someone would just elbow others out of position so they couldn't talk or speak over them or be rude, I mean, those people got crossed off the list incredibly fast. And so that's a kind of dynamic that we generally didn't have available in the process we used on the campus, where we'd interview people one at a time for a well defined position in a school or college. So that was exciting to figure out how to do that. And I'm persuaded—I was persuaded at the time and in retrospect I remained persuaded—that that had a lot to do with the success of those campuses because those two faculties worked incredibly hard, long hours, in making curriculum decisions and making these new campuses actually work and work well. And a specific kind of thing we built in was it was important—this came out of our study of the labor force, from the representation of over a quarter of the labor force in central Puget Sound—what was needed, a need repeated again and again, "We need graduates who can write." And so, there was a very strong writing emphasis on these both campuses from the start. So it was part of the hiring process. How interested are you in helping your students learn to write? And then the faculty needed to work together to operationalize that, and actually how they delivered classes and cooperated with one another in assignments. And so, I think that we were well served by that batch interviewing process we did, though it caused some nervousness, because that's not how we had done things.

Joan Hua 56:39

**Yeah, that interview process was interesting to hear about I think. In the faculty interviews, we've heard multiple people talk about that and talk about how unusual that was. And then after the faculty was hired, they had kind of a convention type of thing to plan the curriculum, I believe. Were you there for that?**

Donna Kerr 57:08

The point at which I stepped out was basically when we were getting close to the doors being ready to open, because I regarded myself as the developmental dean. And I've always known that my strength as a leader is really in getting things going, you know, creating things, rather than turning the crank. And so, and I had always, from the moment I accepted that position of Academic Vice Provost of the University of Washington, I knew that I wanted to go back on the faculty. And so I stayed longer in those roles than I had intended to. And so to me it made total sense to be stepping away at that point. And I was not a part of any kind of conference for—I don't know what you're referring to. That might have happened toward the end of summer, before the campuses opened.

**Joan Hua 58:35**

**Yeah, I believe so. Or maybe in April. I know after the faculty were hired they were invited to come together in sort of an intensive one-day or several-day convention type of thing to talk about what they wanted to teach and talk about courses they wanted to offer when the campus opened, so that's what I was asking about. So did you mean to say you kind of planned to only be the dean of the branch campuses very briefly, until it opened? From the outsider's point of view and like some of the news stories, it seemed like you were appointed in that position for a year or so.**

Donna Kerr 59:26

When I took the position as vice provost, those were five-year appointments. And that's how long I thought I would be in the central administration. And my plan was to go back on the faculty, and because of this request that I shift into a planning role, become the vice provost for planning for branch campuses, I delayed that return. And then, once the legislature mandated that they open in two years, which I say, I have to tell you, I hadn't thought about that possibility, that it'd be such a short timeline. And I agreed to be the dean at that point to develop them. You know, that was a whole new terrain, very intense, extraordinarily intense, and I would not have ... there may have been other people who could do that and want to stay on; I did not. And I did not want to for other reasons that had to do with some of the dynamics on campus of the University of Washington. But my overall goal was to get back on the faculty and I had been turning down opportunities that I didn't want to turn down, academic opportunities. Does that respond? I'm not sure. There's something about your question I'm not responding to but I can't put my finger on it.

**Joan Hua 1:01:21**

**It does. But I did have a question after that about your work, your interactions with University of Washington, for example, with Bill Gerberding, the president at the time. I've heard from people that he may have not been as receptive to the idea of a branch campus initially. Were you in discussions about that? And can you talk about that?**

Donna Kerr 1:01:58

## University of Washington Tacoma Oral History: Founding Stories

Yeah, I'll talk about it because Bill was himself very upfront about it. I want to focus here on not the person Bill Gerberding, but the situation he was in. He was president of a university, our university, which was, as a research campus with just, for all sorts of reasons, huge potential, and it was so underfunded that the faculty pay was, I'm going to use a strong word I don't usually use, lousy. We were nowhere near our peers. And we were losing faculty. Excellent faculty. It was easy to pick off a University of Washington faculty; too easy. And so had I been in Bill Gerberding's position at that time, I would have been I think equally, if not even more, cautious, because my role would have been to represent and promote the health of the University of Washington as an R1 research university in this country, and it's such a resource and had again and again come in on the top of the public universities for federal funding and behind only Johns Hopkins University when you take into account private institutions as well. So we performed, and yet, as the economy struggled in Washington, and our budget took so many hits, I can understand, really understand, Bill's hesitancy. I will say at the same time that George Beckman, who was provost and to whom I reported, always had a way of keeping his eye on educational needs beyond the university as well as in it. It's not that he didn't care about the underfunding of the university. He did. But it was under Bill's guidance that I was making contacts, even before the HEC Board asked us to do this study, with leadership of K-12 education, at the community colleges, and at the private schools and colleges in the area, so that we could be discussing with them: how do we meet the needs? Without being directed to do something about it. So there was a dynamic. Two very different people: the provost, who's chief academic officer and chief budget officer; and Bill Gerberding, who is the CEO, basically, of the university.

So those were the dynamics at play. And so Bill had to, he had to be very attentive to faculty concerns about that. And as a faculty member, if I just put on that hat and took off my other hat, I would think, "No way." If there's money to support education, it's got to be to bring the University of Washington out of the pit in especially faculty salaries. So that was a dynamic going on. So I don't fault Bill for that. And yes, he was ... I wouldn't say he was slow. He was cautious. He was cautious. And yet, he also, you know, he listened, too, and he read the reports carefully, and he followed carefully. And he didn't walk away, even though he would rather the, you know, I don't know if he would rather the legislature not have funding it, but, you know, that doesn't matter. What matters is, I think, to pay attention to the dynamics of the position in which Bill found himself. And so, he and I had a difference of view about—I probably tended to take more George Beckman's view, that: "Yeah, we've got to tend to the university, and—it wasn't an either, or; it was and we need to be responsive to the needs of the state and figure out how to address those together. And so it was not a comfortable or easy position, I think, for Bill. And over time, you know, once the campuses are there, and they're not just branch campuses; they stand on their own feet. I mean, it's a coordinated system, the University of Washington. So I know there's a lot of interest in—I mean, I know people were aware of Bill's hesitancy, and eventually he talked about that, and he, you know, he may have wished he had done it differently. You know, in his position, I'm not sure he could have.

**Joan Hua 1:08:00**

**Yeah, and that kind of speaks to, I guess, the tension in higher education in general, and maybe more and more now, is: when you're trying to preserve the kind of research reputation and "quality" of that and be an accessible institution and serve your population and be inclusive. And I do want to ask a question about admittance rate and that barrier, just because I see at least a news article from that time when the study was going on, that there were students expressing concerns at the capitol about the fact that, I understand, the fact that if University of Washington had a branch campus there, they believed the admittance rate would be so low or it would not be accessible to a lot of the local population. Was that a concern? Or is that ... ?**

Donna Kerr 1:09:14

I'm sorry, I didn't understand the question. The concern you heard expressed was that the standards of admission would go down?

**Joan Hua 1:09:27**

**Or that they were intent on keeping it down. Is that—? And I couldn't really tell if that was just, you know, sometimes when you look at news articles, there are certain things that get picked up. So I was wondering if that was something you were faced with?**

Donna Kerr 1:09:46

I'm not sure I even understand what was expressed there. I would maybe need a little more context. I will tell you that ... let me tell you, because I think it's an interesting piece of history, is that—and I'm not saying this to critique, I mean, to negatively comment upon my fellow faculty members at the University of Washington but just as an interesting dynamic—what happens when you are trying to set up two new campuses, to incubate two new campuses that don't look exactly like, in some ways, what's going on on the main campus? What if you're going to set up the hiring in a different way? What if you're going to put more of a focus on writing? What if you're going to, I mean, there's a whole series of things one could ask. For some people that turned out to feel like a negative comment about what we're doing at the University of Washington, which was only known to be in Seattle, right? So, some people took that as a criticism. "Not good enough for you?" And that certainly wasn't everybody. Many faculty members worked on committees. Many university faculty members worked on committees that help generate important academic policies for the new campuses that sort of get it set up so you could push the button and it would be, "Go." But there were, you know, when you're try to change, it's part of the dynamic of change and the politics of change. If you're trying to do something different, it can be read—doesn't have to be at all—it can be read as a criticism. So if you're going to set up new campuses, what will the acceptance rate be? Will it be different on the new campuses? Will it somehow dilute the name of the University of Washington? Of course, there were people who had those concerns. And sometimes those things would bubble up, get off campus, and sometimes just cause a lot of friction on campus. But I think that's true in any organization while you're trying to make change. Even though it can be based in the best of data and important values, it's still. Change is hard.

**Joan Hua 1:12:57**

**Yeah, thanks for sharing that piece of it. And then you went back to the faculty. Did you interact with the UW Tacoma faculty as you were in the College of Education?**

Donna Kerr 1:13:19

No, only peripherally. What I wanted to do—to be honest, I was exhausted. I walked out, and I took a year sabbatical and got to do the luxurious thing of read a book a day and to get myself back to where I thought I could perform academically at the level I wanted to. And so then I had a good 20-year run of mentoring doctoral students, mostly mentoring doctoral students, which was my greatest love, and focusing on issues of democracy and equity in education. And I will say that from that perch, I've been very happy with the fact that the two new campuses exist, and they aren't new anymore, but that they exist, because they were born out of a need, not just for more opportunities at the upper-division level, but if you looked inside that, more opportunities for people who had been underserved. And I'm going to name them: persons of color and women, and that intersection. And the campuses have responded to that. And so, that's one aspect that I'm incredibly proud of, is that the University of Washington was able to step up to providing greater education equity by establishing these two new campuses.

**Joan Hua 1:15:12**

**Yeah. And that kind of gets to my next question, which is, your study was making projections up to around 2010, and now we're in 2020, 30 years later. How do you see those projections and the projected growth of University of Washington Tacoma in particular?**

Donna Kerr 1:15:38

Well, I hear sort of two questions there. One is, how did the projection stand up? And soon after, we had completed our report, in the following years, the HEC Board wisely sort of replicated different parts of the study to test them, validate them. And I'm just incredibly grateful to our team that as the HEC Board staff went through the findings with magnifying glasses, it stood up well. In fact they found greater need than we had put out there. But you know, within reason; it was within our boundaries. And so the projection stood up on outside review, outside our team. And then later on—I haven't gone back and looked at demographics; it's just not been on my horizon right now but to see how the projection set up—but no one could have anticipated the huge economic engine that Seattle developed into, and the whole region has grown, I think, beyond what any of us imagined. So, but those are things you can't predict. The coming of Amazon you can't predict. I mean, a lot of those developments. But we certainly, I mean, it's certainly a wonderful thing that we have the campuses there, and I do have a sense of pride every time I see that someone graduated from University of Washington Tacoma or University of Washington Bothell.

**Joan Hua 1:17:54**

**And you mentioned that your work has been focused on educational policy and equity. And as we're talking now, I think higher education or the state universities are facing a**

**lot of uncertainties. You know, we're still in a pandemic and the budgets are uncertain. And then, there are concerns with enrollment and teaching online and all that sort of thing. Can you kind of reflect on that and talk a bit about equity issues in higher education now?**

Donna Kerr 1:18:53

On that one, I'm going to step back a bit because what I have thought is that, "What a difficult time." For example, Ana Mari Cauce I think is a great president for the university, and in the 1980s it would have been unthinkable that a Latina woman would be in that position. I mean, just unthinkable and wonderful. So, I've just thought, "Wow, Ana Mari, what a job you've got to do." This is, I can't imagine a time of a bigger challenge for the university than during—universities generally—during this pandemic. Colleges. It's just excruciatingly hard. What I do think is we as a society have to be very concerned about losing our educational institutions who in a democracy provide not just economic engines but provide a basis for an enlightened citizenry that we absolutely need. And to let not just research universities but at all levels education languish in a time of pandemic and a huge downturn in the economy would be—I'm going to use again a strong word—a disaster. And without, although it's hard in conversation today to avoid touching on what's going on at the federal level in our country, we're in a time of crisis not just in the academy, but in the context that desperately needs the academy, that needs science.

And so it's, you know, I can write letters, and I can encourage people, but I'm retired and I'm at a distance now. Even though we had a tough time in the '70s and '80s with Boeing's downturn and, you know, the other things that we could talk about, but this is so much harder. It's so much harder for education, which has also been taking just crazy hits at the federal level that are highly worrisome. And so while I'm delighted to have UWT there, I'm deeply concerned for all of our education in this country.

**Joan Hua 1:22:13**

**Thanks. I'm also curious if you could kind of compare what happened in Washington state, in terms of how the branch campuses were established and how you did the study, and how branch campuses are normally established in other states. How unusual was this process that Washington state underwent in the late '80s?**

Donna Kerr 1:22:49

Yeah. Let me mention California in a different time for higher education. California had a practice of doing long-term studies and planning campuses, and it's taking many years to set them up, but they for a long time had a plan for how to develop the UC system. And so, they would do studies and take time to do things. So it was gradual and it was very well funded. So, what we were trying to do is: do all the homework and then at the moment the legislature said, "Open the doors in two year," we did it at breakneck speed. So there is no other state in which that combination happened, where we did the due diligence of the very careful studies and projections. And in fact, if I may say, our team did an absolutely fabulous job, and I love the

work that HEC Board did to check it out. So we did the work you needed to do to know what the right choices would be. And on the downside, we had to do it so fast that I think we take, we for sure take the gold in the fact that we did it and the effort didn't collapse, and the doors opened. So we're unusual in that we both did the homework and did it lickety split. There's no place that's done it faster than the state of Washington did it.

**Joan Hua 1:25:08**

**Yeah, thanks for that context. I was interested to hear that. I think we're getting to the end of the interview here. And I just want to ask if you have other reflections or other things that we didn't talk about that you wanted to add.**

Donna Kerr 1:25:30

Nothing occurs to me right now. Surely, you know, 10 minutes from now, after we've hung up, something may occur. But no, I think I want to compliment you on your questions. I think you pulled out sort of the basic and important narrative to be told about the development of the new campuses from the perspective of those of us who worked on it before the doors opened.

And I guess there is one other point I would make. I have a picture that's long been on my wall that I'm especially proud of. And in the current context of the Black Lives movement and appropriately heightened concerned about equity, as I look at the leadership team that we developed, once we were given the go to open campuses, albeit very, very rapidly, the team we put together, the five-person team consisted of three women, two people of color. I mean, we reflected what the need was on the new campuses, even though we were not going to be on the campuses. So it's in, as I reflect back on the values that I've long held and that are now more featured, and appropriately so, about educational equity, I'm proud of the work we did from the start, and I'm proud of the university in the state of Washington for what it did.

**Joan Hua 1:27:39**

**Thank you for that. Just for the historical record, can you name the five people that were on the team?**

Donna Kerr 1:27:48

Sure. Lee Brock, who was hired to take care of recruitment and admissions at UWT. He'd been on the Raiders football team, was just a wonderful guy, African American, who did a beautiful job. Amy Maki, who served in a parallel role at UW Bothell. And Michael Magee, who was my assistant and had graduated, had a doctoral degree, was a poet and had been on faculty. And who am I missing here? Harvey. Blanking on her first name. Harvey was our financial director and knew data stuff very well. She was hugely helpful especially in the siting of UWT when it was a matter of being between the Tacoma Community College campus and downtown. I mean, we costed that out as a business proposition: where would you put it? And in addition to for accessibility. And the work she did was just stellar. So that was our team. Sue Harvey, right.

**Joan Hua 1:29:39**

**Thank you.**

Donna Kerr 1:29:42

You know, there is, are we still recording because there is one other thing.

**Joan Hua 1:30:13**

**Yes.**

Donna Kerr 1:29:46

Okay. I'm feeling grateful to the community people, even though I've been careful not to name people too much because there were so many. I've named a few. But community members who, for all sorts of reasons, either via their work with community organizations, such as Rotary or business groups, who came out along the way to all sorts of meetings and invited me in as a spokesperson, and that there was that level of interest and excitement about, attention to: How should we educate people? And to what level? And how many should get it, become educated? The interest in education as an institution was beautiful. And I'm hoping that we can somehow keep those fires burning because we're going to need that going forward to be able to sustain a role for education in our society. And so, I find that both exciting, and I hope it's a harbinger of what we can do in the future.

Thank you, Joan.

**Joan Hua 1:31:13**

**Yeah, thank you. I'm going to end the recording here, but you don't have to hang up yet.**

Donna Kerr 1:31:17

Okay.