SUSAN RESNIK: Today is Friday, May 6, 2011. This is Susan Resnik. I’m in the Department of Special Collections and University Archives at San Diego State University, where I’ll be recording the oral history of Stephen L. Weber, president of San Diego State University. This interview is part of the oral history project funded by a John and Jane Adams mini-grant. President Weber is the seventh president of San Diego State University. He assumed the presidency in 1996, and is now stepping down. He is a graduate of Bowling Green University, with a B.A. in philosophy. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Notre Dame in 1969. He is the author of numerous articles on philosophy and on higher education. He is a dynamic and beloved leader, who involves students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the community in shaping Shared Vision, a road map for the university’s future.

He has received numerous honors, awards and fellowships. Among them are Distinguished Alumnus of the Year, Bowling Green State University, in 2004; Peacemaker Award, San Diego Mediation Center, 1997; honorary degree, Beijing Capital Normal University, Beijing, China, 1994; Outstanding Humanities Teacher at the University of Maine, 1975. As a public servant, he has served on the board of the San Diego Foundation. He has also served as the past chair of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities Board of Directors. He
I am delighted and honored to have the opportunity to collaborate with President Weber today to create his oral history. Good morning, President Weber.

STEPHEN L. WEBER: Good morning, Susan.

SR: Let’s begin at the beginning. Tell me about where and when you were born.

SLW: I was born on March 17, 1942, Saint Patrick’s Day. It’s always been a pleasure to have a birthday on Saint Patrick’s Day, particularly when I was at Notre Dame. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts.

SR: Tell me about your family.

SLW: Let’s go back. My Grandfather Weber was an executive with United Shoe Machinery Corporation, and did a good deal of work abroad. He was in Germany during World War I, and was kept there by the German government—imprisoned for him. His family was allowed to go home. The malnutrition that he suffered during World War I is thought to have caused his early death. My Grandmother Weber was a very strong woman, who I knew. My Grandfather Weber was a very strong woman, who I knew. I didn’t know my Grandfather Weber; because he had died long before I was born. But my Grandmother Weber I knew, a very strong-willed woman who had raised the family, often on her own, while her husband was in Europe. A very international couple.

My Grandfather Warns—my mother’s name was Catherine [phonetic] Warns. My Grandfather Warns, John, was a farmer. But that doesn’t really
capture it. He was an entrepreneur. He and my grandmother had five children, one of whom died at the age of twenty. Grandma and Grandpa Warns had three other sons, all of whom were farmers in the vicinity of Toledo, Ohio and a single daughter, my mother, who was the youngest. And my Grandfather Warns bought each of his children a farm, including his daughter, which was unusual at the time. And as I said, he was very much an entrepreneur. So he was one of the founders of the grain co-op in Stony Ridge, Ohio. You cannot imagine how rural Stony Ridge, Ohio, was, and still is. And he also founded the bank there. Farmers Savings Bank it was called. And my grandmother was a traditional farm wife—at least it seemed that way to me. She raised her own family, made spectacular pumpernickel bread. Just spectacular pumpernickel bread. But as you can gather from those names of Weber and Warns, our heritage is German, and hence the pumpernickel bread. My grandfather and I used to enjoy Grandma’s—her pumpernickel bread was so dense, that my grandfather and I used to have contests as to who could slice it the thinnest. And you could slice it extraordinarily thin, and it was still very, very rich. She used to always have a cache of candy corn for us.

My grandfather Warns was, as I said, a farmer, and an inventive man. He had a wonderful workshop that I remember being in as a kid, with his own forge. You know, farmers have to make things. In the barn, he designed a chute for loading sheep or pigs or cattle onto trucks. And it was wonderfully designed so that it folded into the wall. The door would open outward, and then the chute
would fall forward, out towards the truck, and then there’d be a gate that popped up on the other side. We had a natural path to lead the livestock up into the truck. And he did lots of things of that sort. I remember his old forge had, as those hand-fired forges do, a crank on the side of it. And as a kid, I got to crank the forge.

My father was born in Frankfurt, Germany. As I said, my grandparents were spending a lot of time in Germany. My Grandmother Weber had the notion—she was concerned about his future father’s citizenship, since he was being born in Germany. And of course he was born at home, so there was literally an American flag hung over the bed, because that was her sense of being born under the American flag, the literal sense of that.

SR: That’s great!

SLW: Yeah, it is. My mother was the only daughter in the family, as I said earlier, and she lived a very, very interesting life. She was on the women’s basketball team that won the championship of the state of Ohio. She went off to become a nurse—the only one in her family to have any formal higher education in the family—and graduated in the top of her class. There was a certification exam at that time, in the state of Ohio, and she had the best grades in the state on that exam. But then she married a high school basketball coach, and he died almost immediately—I think within a year or two—of an infection that would have been trivial to us now, but without sulfur drugs and everything, it killed him. She went off then to be an airline stewardess, one of the very first airline stewardesses for [American] Airlines. You then had to be a nurse or

maybe a college graduate. One of the ways you could be a stewardess was to be a nurse. She was very attractive, and then for a while she worked in New York and was a Powers model, in New York, but didn’t like that, and returned to the airlines. She met my dad in Nashville, Tennessee, when she was flying in and out of Nashville. She, at that time, was now working for United Shoe Machinery Corporation, as his father had. And since that was kind of a New England industry, we ended up… As I said, I was born in Boston, and they lived with me in Belmont when I was really small, then Worcester, Massachusetts, until, I’m going to guess I was six or seven years old. Then we moved to Marblehead, Massachusetts, which is on the North Shore above Boston. Most of my childhood memories are from Marblehead.

My father became the general manager for United Shoe Machinery Corporation’s plant in Lynn, Massachusetts, at an early age. He then also had a very early death. He died when I was nine, of a heart attack. But the interesting thing—I leapt ahead—he and his family were living in Larchmont, outside of New York City for quite a while. There’s a branch of the Weber family that’s sort of Philadelphia based and in that part of the world. And then dad’s family, his mother and father and his two sisters, moved out to San Francisco, when he was high school age. And he was, I gather, a handful as a kid. And so strangely enough, he was sent to San Diego, and enrolled in the Army-Navy academy, which was then in downtown San Diego, over by Garnet Avenue, I think. We’ve still got the yearbooks. This would have been
1930, ’31, kind of, period. Interestingly enough, the yearbooks show—he was a very good athlete; and they show pictures of him playing tennis and golf and basketball. There’s no picture of him ever in the library, and I think there’s a reason for that. But in any event, he then went on to, I think it was Santa Monica Junior College, but I’m not sure of that. He never pursued his education beyond that.

SR: Did you have any siblings?

SLW: I do have two siblings: John and Roger. John is three years younger than I am. He now lives in Wauseon, Swanton, Ohio, which is a suburb of Toledo, sort of west of Toledo. And Roger, who lives in Michigan, in…. Let me see, it’s not…. I’ve forgotten the address right now, but just west of Detroit [Farmington Hills].

John was a businessman—he went to Berea-Baldwin Wallace College in [Kentucky, Ohio], served in the—I don’t know whether it was the army national guard, or the Air Force National Guard—but served in the national guard, and ultimately became part of the extended auto industry in that part of the country. He retired early, in his mid fifties. He was then also the—I’m not sure of the title—but I think he was the general manager of a company near Toledo that makes gaskets and things like that to supply the auto industry. He and his wife Sharon are still very much happy and healthy and enjoying their lives.

My youngest brother, Roger, was nine years younger than I. And remember, I said that my father died when I was nine?—(SR: Yes.) The interesting thing is that, Roger was two weeks old, so my mother was left with three young sons to raise, and did [if I do say so myself] a spectacular job of it.

But I’ve always suspected, since Roger was born so much later, that he was a surprise. But if so, it turned out to be a really great surprise, because as I left the house to go to school, and eventually John did, Roger was still there. He became a real companion for my mother. My mother was a very good public speaker, and always interested in things of that sort, and Roger became a broadcaster. He went to Bowling Green State University, as I did, majored in communications and journalism, and even as a student Roger was doing student news broadcasts, which my mother could pick up from where she lived. Like me, Roger we commuted to Bowling Green State. But then he became a TV reporter in the Toledo area, and eventually in Detroit. He works now for NBC in Detroit, and has worked there for at least twenty-five years, which is a really long time, obviously, in that business. And he has Roger and Corinna have two children; and John and Sharon have has one.

SR: Well, as you described the beginnings of your childhood with the pumpernickel bread, I’m salivating! But tell me also about family holidays, your early memories, school.

SLW: Well, let me start by saying that when my father died, my mother, who was, as I said, the only daughter, and a nurse, went back to Ohio, in part to care for her aging parents. But also, to raise her three sons under the influences of her brothers, the farmers. There was no particular reason to stay in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Even though it offered a much better life for her, it wasn’t as good a place to raise us. So we grew up with our cousins, and particularly Uncle Bob was a real influence on me. But I think it’s true for John as well.
Uncle Ernie and Uncle Herm. These were hardworking farmers, *with a and* great work ethic. *Just really good at what they did, but worked very hard to be good at what they did. So a lot of holidays meant large celebrations with cousins. And as it happened, there were about a dozen cousins there, T--and there was a cluster that were the oldest ones, (as I was), and they were all about the same age, so we kind of hung out together. TAnd then there was another group, more or less John’s age, and another group more or less Roger’s age. So the cousins would break up. But when my grandparents were alive, the holidays would typically be in their farmhouse.

It was an old-fashioned farmhouse on Route 20 in Ohio. Route 20 was, of course, one of the first trans-continental roads; in and at that place, it had *earlier* been a corduroy road, which was interesting. It wasn’t, obviously, anymore, but there was that whole tradition and history there. TAnd their house was right on that road. When I say an old farmhouse, it had a big linoleum-*floored* kitchen floor. It had had a pump room, a basement with food cabinets for canned goods and things like that—a cold storage sort of place. It had a big dining room, dining room table, old sideboard, a living room, and then a separate parlor, which was the fashion then. Of course originally it didn’t have an indoor bathroom at all, but *by the time I was there* they had an indoor bathroom. They had a big four-clawed tub, which I remember just swimming laps in as a kid. Very nice.

When we were young, *and* there’d be a *big* dinner, there’d be too many of us to all be at the same table, so there’d be a kids’ table, *and* an adults’ table. *And then After dinner* we would go out and play. *D--and depending on the time of the*
year, that meant either we might be playing softball out in the yard…. The yards were big, and great big trees, silver maples and elm trees. So there was lots of room to set up a softball diamond, or to play touch football or whatever else. But if it was winter — sort of Thanksgiving, Christmas, then we played in the barn. The barn became a wonderful place for us to hang out. We raised livestock and things like that. But there was a hay mow where we built forts out of hay bales, and elaborate tunnels and chambers and multi-story things, which was really fun. And we had a space that we cleared for a very large basketball court, with baskets at each end so we could play full court, with bare light bulbs hanging to light it during the day or night.

(recording paused)

SR: Okay, so [please] continue.

SLW: Well, let me back up with the barn. When my father was still alive, he was very proud. My dad built a platform so that the back seat, where your feet would normally be, you could sleep. So John and I the could sleep kids would be in the back seat. And the kids were basically John and myself, at that point, obviously. And while they would drive…. My guess memory is they’d go along the Mohawk Trail, because we would always stop at kind of a semi amusement park on the Mohawk Trail that we would be treated to on the way. I’m sure we stopped at a little motel to break the drive, because we didn’t have the super highways that moved as quickly. And when we
would be out there, then, it would be summertime, and we would be working at the farm (feeding livestock, hoeing crops, etc.), but working the way city kids would work on the farm. So it was fun to us, and but we would be learning about the experience.

But then, as we were there more frequently, (and my dad had died now), but just before—we still had to moved out there to Ohio. (To do that, Mom we had to build a house; so that took a couple of years.) But at that point we would visit in the summer, and my Uncle Bob would buy livestock for John and me. And so he might, for example, buy sixty or so head of sheep. And we would raise those sheep during the summer, and then he would take them to market. And we would go with him to the old auctions and listen, and sell the sheep. And then he would pay us the profits of this. And as a kid I never understood the auctioneers or how much money, what they were bidding actually was going to translate into. And I remember sitting at that old kitchen table with my Uncle Bob and John. Hand he had our money in one-dollar bills; and sort of dealt out five dollars to each of us and said, “Is that enough?” And we were just delighted, we’d never seen five dollars before! Because that was the time when your allowance might be twenty-five cents a week. And he said, “You sure you don’t want more?” And he’d start kept going. And I remember one summer we had something over forty dollars each, and I just felt independently wealthy. It was a great experience of raising the livestock and learning from that. [I had a paper route back in Marblehead.]
And then, of course, as we then moved out to Ohio, we always raised livestock, and I would use the barn for those purposes. My grandparents weren’t really farming anymore, and so the barn was there. And I would commute from there to Bowling Green State. So it meant that every morning we were up early doing chores, and in the evening we were doing chores. But it was also a source of income for us. I don’t mean for us as a family, I mean more for me as an individual.

SR: That sounds marvelous. It really does.

SLW: It was!

SR: Tell me about school.

SLW: Well, I started at Glover Elementary School in Marblehead, Massachusetts. We lived on Leicester [pronounced Lester] Street, spelled in the British sort of way—Leicester Street, I think it was—in Marblehead. So I could walk to the elementary school, which I did every day. There were playgrounds. At the bottom of the street, there were wonderful vacant fields—overgrown vacant fields where my playmates and I would play. And we were about five or six blocks from the ocean and from Preston Beach. So in the summers, when I was not in Ohio, I had a towel around my neck, and I would be on the bike, and we’d be down at Preston Beach.

SR: Did you eat a lot of ice cream, do you remember? I’m curious because I always associate the best ice cream with Massachusetts.
SLW: We used to eat saltwater taffy. And fried clams were big then. The best ice cream we had was actually in Ohio, because we would make the hand-cranked old homemade ice cream. And that would be a real treat.

SR: Well, your early years in school were starting in Massachusetts.

SLW: I would have been in about the third grade when my father died. And I don’t think we got to moved to Ohio until sixth or seventh grade, somewhere in there. I’m sure I was in Massachusetts still for the fourth and fifth grade, because I remember the teachers there. And now my mother’s trying to figure out how to raise three sons, so I spent a lot of time at the YMCA. I learned to shoot pool really well. And that’s been a lifetime enjoyment of mine, and an occasional source of income—and learning to swim and to do all the other things you do at a Y. I was in Boy Scouts and things like that. And then we moved out to Ohio.

We moved to Ohio; let’s say I was either in the sixth or seventh grade, roughly that time. I was completely out of place, because I was sent to school not in jeans, but in gabardines. I didn’t know how to dress the part. My mother didn’t know how to do it either. She wasn’t paying attention to that. So for a long time that was—in fact, I think basically the time there, I was very ill at ease in school. The junior high was about a mile or two from the house, but I think we used the school bus to get there—rode bikes on unusual occasions. But the high school was Troy-Luckey High School, in Luckey, Ohio. Luckey, Ohio, spelled with an E-Y, would have been about—spelled with an E-Y would have been about five or six miles south of our house, and I definitely rode the bus there.
And again, I was not a particularly good student. And I was not at all gregarious. But I ran into a wonderful teacher named Helen Rolfus, and she taught... She seemed, of course, ancient. Now my guess is at that time she was about forty-five, but she seemed really ancient then. And she taught me Latin, but also taught geometry and algebra. For reasons I don’t fully understand—because when I say I wasn’t a good student, I was a “C” sort of student. But Helen Rolfus came to my mother and said, “We’re just not capable of challenging Steve.” Now how and why she discerned that, I have no idea.

SR: Interesting.

SLW: It was interesting, in retrospect. So my mother sent me to a prep school called Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills, outside of Detroit, Michigan—a beautiful, wonderful place, where a lot of my appreciation for aesthetics and architecture were derived. And so I was at Cranbrook for two years. And Cranbrook was a very good school—really a super-good school.

SR: Now was this during junior high?

SLW: High school. What happened was, I was at Troy-Luckey High School as a freshman and sophomore. Then I went to Cranbrook. But the high school there [i.e., Troy-Luckey] was not a very good high school. It was a typical rural high school. And so Cranbrook said I had to go back to being a sophomore, so I lost a year. Spent two years at Cranbrook. Again, I had a wonderful time, and it really influenced me mightily, and taught me lots of good things, but I was not a
particularly good student. John then joined me at Cranbrook. And then both of us, at their invitation, left. (chuckles) So I am literally a high school dropout, because I did not graduate from high school, even though I had four years of high school, and in effect had enough credits to get my general equivalency and to go to a university. I went to Bowling Green State, which was about seventeen miles from our house. So I would commute the drive to and from campus every day.

I should say, the first summer, when I went to summer orientation, I sought out the philosophy department, and I went in and I told them I was going to be a philosophy major. That’s because of the chance to have studied philosophy at Cranbrook, which very few high-school-age students could study philosophy at that time. So I’ve always loved philosophy, and I was kind of clear that’s what I wanted to do. So I’ve pursued it ever since.

SR: That’s so interesting. At that time, I don’t even recall philosophy being an option in high school.

SLW: It wouldn’t have been. Certainly not at Troy-Luckey!

SR: Right. I went to a public high school….

SLW: It wouldn’t have been, no.

SR: That’s interesting. Were your first philosophy teachers particularly interesting too, or was it just the subject that grabbed…?

SLW: The subject was. I enjoyed the questions. I really enjoyed the questions. That’s what I’ve always liked about philosophy—more than the answers, it’s the questions. The professor there was…. Cranbrook is an Episcopalian school, and he was an Episcopalian priest named Father Young, if I remember correctly. And
He was just a really very good teacher, and chose good texts, and I enjoyed the, and these are obviously introductory philosophy courses—but I enjoyed them, and it’s what I wanted to do. Of course at that time, you didn’t really worry very much about getting a job, so it wasn’t as if that choice was going to compromise my ability to earn a living. Getting a baccalaureate degree was then sort of the entrée into the work force. So I wasn’t worried about that.

SR: That’s very interesting. So in college, you got into philosophy right away. What else about college—and I’m thinking of the times, the years we’re talking about now, are….

SLW: I went to Bowling Green State in 1960 and graduated in ’64.

SR: Yeah, so we’re talking about the sixties, which is quite a time.

SLW: The early sixties, though, early sixties. This is the time of the Kingston Trio; Peter, Paul, and Mary; and sort of folk music. I was, again, a not particularly accomplished student. I got was placed on academic probation one semester. But I really enjoyed the college experience. But and as I said, I’m living at home, commuting back and forth, so I wasn’t very much involved in collegiate activities or things of that sort. And most importantly, I met my wife Susan at Bowling Green State.

SR: Ah-ha, right.

SLW: That was the summer after my sophomore year. She was a year ahead of me, so it was the summer before her senior year. She was a very good student, unlike myself. We met in a modern poetry class. She was working several jobs. Her home was Urbana, Ohio, which was about a hundred miles south of Bowling
Green State. She lived on campus, was very active and involved in things, was a member of the Alpha Xi Z Sorority. She was, as I said, working several different jobs, was performing in theater, and was dating a number of guys. So that was a very nice summer. To leap ahead, I’m not sure, it must have been that summer, I remember taking Susan home to meet my family, and I don’t know if I’d ever brought a woman home to meet the family before, so it was a bit of an event, and we were all trying to figure out how this actually worked. That is, my mother was trying to figure out how this actually worked. So she served a wonderful sort of Sunday dinner. She served a leg of lamb, which we used to often enjoy leg of lamb, and served it on good china, a big Limoges platter that my Grandmother Weber had passed down into the family. And while Mom and I—and I’m sure Susan—were trying to figure out how this worked, my younger brothers had no trouble figuring it out at all. This was an opportunity. So they were working to make everybody miserable.

But one of our favorite stories happened afterwards. In the nature of the time, after dinner was done, my brothers and I went out to play basketball in the barn, and while Susan and while Mom were left to clean up lunch-dinner and do the dishes.

SR: Right!

SLW: Pre-dishwasher then, I think, but they were certainly washing dishes. But maybe if there was a dishwasher, it was not the sort of place….

SR: And you wouldn’t put the Limoges platter in there.
SLW: Exactly. So they were doing the dishes. I should mention that and the play that Susan had been in that summer was “Barefoot in Athens.” She played the role of Theodote [phonetic] and Theodote [phonetic] was the mistress of Socrates. My mother, as they were at a double sink, and my mother was washing, and Susan was drying. Mom passed the Limoges platter to Susan, and said, “So, tell me about yourself. All Steve has said is that you’re a prostitute!” which Susan very much appreciated—just great. My mother had a wonderful sense of humor.

SR: That’s marvelous! And the Limoges plate didn’t drop?

SLW: Yes, that’s what Susan’s most proud of in this story.

SR: That’s a great story. And so you met Susan in college, and that began to shape a lot of…. 

SLW: Yes, it did. She was, as I said, a very successful student; graduated at the top of her class; got two different degrees. Top of her class in Education. She got a B.S. in Education, and a B.A. in American Studies and English. And that was very unusual at the time. And of course she did it all in four years, while she was working all these different jobs and things. Susan but she had a great critic teacher, because as the top of her class she got her choice of the best critic teachers, and hers was named Miss Gaelvin [phonetic]. And Miss Gaelvin was a very important influence on Susan. And Susan went off—now it’s my senior year—Susan went off to teach in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, teaching English and speech, in, I think it was Parcells [phonetic] Middle Junior High School. And it was at that time—and this is one of the stories I like—that she dumped me for a football player.
SR: Ohhhh.

SLW: Exactly. It was the classic struggle of the philosopher against the football player. And so for about a year, maybe over a year, I was still on campus, and Susan was in Detroit and dating this football player. So it wasn’t until after I graduated, that Susan and I got back together again and started dating again, but very tangentially the way these relationships can sometimes be reignited.

——— I went off — Susan then she’s still teaching in Grosse Pointe — I went off to the University of Colorado, to the philosophy department there.

SR: Yes, I see that.

SLW: So that would be from ’64 to ’66. But from ’64 to ’65, I was in Colorado; Susan was still living in Detroit and teaching in Grosse Pointe. But then I persuaded her to come out and visit me in Colorado for Thanksgiving; and I proposed to her at Christmastime that year; and then we were married the next summer, and drove out to Colorado. So the 1965-66 year, we both lived in student housing at the University of Colorado — every, very nice time. Susan taught that year in a suburb outside of Denver. And then I was accepted to the Ph.D. program at Notre Dame. So after a year in Colorado, we went to Notre Dame. She began teaching in Elkhart. She taught that year in a suburb outside of Denver. Then we moved to — we didn’t actually move to South Bend; we moved to Elkhart, Indiana, where Susan taught in Elkhart high schools, and I taught at Notre Dame as a graduate assistant while I was doing my doctorate.
That, of course, was almost the extremes of the educational experience. Susan was literally refereeing food fights in the cafeteria, while I was teaching valedictorians under the golden dome. It was really sort of the whole spectrum of education. And of course, part of the things that was really tragic about much of what Susan dealt with, is you had high school students whose parents had never graduated from high school, who had no intent of graduating from high school themselves, who were waiting to be sixteen so they could drop out of school. So that was a difficult period. Elkhart, and it was a town there that was a hardscrabble sort of place, made manufactured trailers. Conn trumpets, among other things, were made there—and other musical instruments.

SR: And what was Susan teaching, history or English, or…?

SLW: No, speech and English primarily. And at that time she was also the debate coach, and she had been a very successful public speaker herself, winning a championship of Ohio State when she was a high school student. And so she taught speech and taught debate, and often would be with her debate team on a weekend, because they’d have to go off and debate someplace.

SR: Nice.

(recording paused)

SLW: You were observing that Susan and I are very much of a team. That’s really true. And I think it’s been one of the secrets, both of the just sheer joy of living that we share, but also to the success that I’ve had, because as I’ve had a chance to work with university presidents all over the United States, often university presidents have spouses who are not themselves assets; or and sometimes...
spouses who are not interested; or and sometimes spouses who are liabilities. And of course sometimes they do not have spouses at all that are dead. So for me to have such a gregarious spouse, who works the room better than I do; who and hears all the things that I sometimes don’t hear, has been extraordinarily helpful. The other thing is, as I said, Susan’s discipline is communications. So from the time we were beginning an administrative career, and I was beginning to speak publicly, Susan would critique my speeches. To this day, when we drive home, Susan is explaining what I could have done better. So Susan has—we joke about the fact that we’ve almost reversed roles, because Susan was a cheerleader, very gregarious, outgoing, all those qualities; I was a complete nerd, introverted. And as life has moved along, she has transformed me into a much more social creature than I ever was. Now she is relishing the privacy. In recent years she’s been able to spend summers in Maine, and is relishing-looking forward to the prospect of retirement and fewer social obligations.

SR: That’s marvelous, and to see how that happens in terms of the effect on each other. That’s wonderful, because certainly now, I know from what I hear and what I’ve read, you are known for the way you communicate and relate and involve everybody.

SLW: That’s definitely Susan. That’s absolutely Susan.

SR: And Susan, as you know, is my name as well. It’s such a popular name from that era.

SLW: Yes, although as I’m sure you’ve noticed also, it has so many various formats.
SR: Oh yes.

SLW: And Susan prefers Susan, as I take it you do as well.

SR: Well, it’s either Susan or Suzi.

SLW: Well, [my] Susan prefers Susan. She really does. It annoys her when people call her Suzanne or other formations of the name.

SR: Yeah. Well, I’ve gone through different stages. In high school I was called Sue.

SLW: Yes. Susan does not like Sue either.

SR: I don’t either. I don’t know why, I just don’t. I think Susan was definitely my adult name.

Well, in college, and then in graduate school, as you continued with your emphasis in philosophy, tell me more about that, and how you selected your dissertation topic, and how that all evolved.

SLW: Well, let me say a couple of things about that. First of all, as I’ve said several times, I wasn’t a very good student. I became a good student when I [got married to] Susan. It was an interesting thing. I think I got serious about life and my work and my studies when Susan and I got married.

But back to about philosophy, I want to back up to meeting Susan’s parents. I talked about Susan meeting my mother. As I said, Susan lived about a hundred miles south of Bowling Green State, she did not have a car at Bowling Green State. I had applied for admission to Wittenberg, which is a seminary in Springfield. I am an atheist, so it wasn’t that I felt any great calling. I enjoyed the relation to philosophy and the chance to pursue these questions. So in that process, I would lie to Susan and I’d say, “I’m going down for an interview at..."
Wittenberg, would you like a ride down to say hello to your parents?"

That would mean we’d have two hours together in the car going down. I would meet her parents, I would help put screen windows up or whatever. (That way I could ingratiate myself to her parents.) Wittenberg was in Springfield, Ohio, and that’s about probably thirty miles away from Urbana. And so then I would excuse myself to go to my fictitious meeting at Wittenberg. I would in fact go downtown and shoot pool; come back three or four hours later; pick up Susan; and we would drive back to Bowling Green.

One of the stories Susan likes to tell is that after first meeting her parents, her father, who was a small-town businessman, said, “Well, he’s a nice enough guy I suppose, but what does a philosopher do?” And it’s a fair enough question if you’re living in the real world. I should back up and say a little bit about Susan’s parents. Her father worked for the old Morris Five-and-Dime Stores, and ran a five-and-dime store. And then when that folded, he went to work as a foreman at Grimes. And Grimes Industries made most of the airplane lighting in the free world during World War II. This is not that long after World War II. And so it was still a major aircraft lighting company right there in Urbana, Ohio, where Susan had gone to school, and as I said, had been a cheerleader and had all those memories. I don’t think Susan’s father graduated from high school, but I know her mother didn’t. They grew up in Indiana. Susan had two brothers—one is since deceased. And there too, a very typical way for the 1950s, 1960s, they were determined that all three of their kids would go to college. And they all did, Susan among them.
SR: That’s very nice. Well, getting back to philosophy….

SLW: Oh! that’s right! I went, as I said, to Bowling Green State as a philosophy major.

I never wavered from that. I had two teachers who were particularly good. One was a man named Sherman Stan[dageidge [phonetic]]. A wonderful, great teacher. One of those remarkable teachers that students gravitate towards. By this time I had left, but during the late sixties, he was leading protests against the Vietnamese War, and was ultimately fired from Bowling Green State for his political activities. He went off to Northern Illinois, where he finished his career. And I stayed in tangential touch with him through those many years.

Another was Robert Goodwin, G-O-D-W-I-N, who taught, among other things, medieval philosophy, and was really a… While Sherman Stanidge was an inspiration and a pied piper, Robert Goodwin was really a very good professional mentor. He wrote a book at that time, a commentary on Thomas Aquinas’ De Ente et Essentia [phonetic], and he let me annotate the footnotes for it one summer—giving me employment. This is the summer between my graduation and going off to graduate school. He was just a good person, kind of helping me develop professionally.

I went then to the University of Colorado, right into philosophy, although I also studied classics there. And I had a good experience. This University of Colorado is now a major philosophy department, unlike Bowling Green State, where you didn’t have that many people in the philosophy department. There were really some serious philosophers with national reputations. I wanted to do my master’s thesis on Zabummerilla. Zabummerilla is an obscure
Renaissance philosopher. And I could not find anybody in the philosophy department there who had the least interest in doing a thesis on Zabarella, i.e., in guiding me through one. So I wasn’t able to do Zabarella, and instead, I did John of Salisbury. John of Salisbury wrote several books, and he’s an eleventh-century figure. He was the secretary to Thomas Becket—interesting man, although probably more interesting to a philosopher than to most people. But in fact, it was not a thesis I loved. It wasn’t something I wanted to do, it was something I could get a faculty member to help me do. And that was important, because then when I left the University of Colorado to go to Notre Dame, I had learned an important lesson: I’m not going to do a dissertation on a topic that I’m not interested in—because it’s a lot of work. I just didn’t want to do that.

SR: I understand.

SLW: So I went to Notre Dame. Now this is a really distinguished philosophy department. Philosophy’s sort of a mainline discipline at Notre Dame. I was interested in medieval philosophy. There were only two places to go: it was either Notre Dame or Toronto. Those were the two best medieval departments on this continent. And I ended up at Notre Dame, really fine experience. Wonderful faculty. And of course I loved the experience of being a graduate student—this was true of Colorado as well—where now all your work is philosophy, as opposed to the usual undergraduate experience where you’re taking a variety of courses. So I had always loved philosophy, and I just ate up that experience.

SR: That’s great.
SLW: And I had a lot of very, very good teachers: Ernan e-McMullen for philosophy of science, was one that was particularly good. Joseph Bobick became a real mentor of mine. He was a medievalist. He became my dissertation director. 

SLW: And what I wanted to do was to write a dissertation that would be interesting to me. So I wrote a dissertation on—The title is, “Proofs for the Existence of God: A Meta Investigation.” Now what this is, in fact, is a refutation of all the traditional proofs of the existence of God, which was a particular pleasure to write at a place like Notre Dame.

SR: Wow.

SLW: Going back to what I said, that would be interesting. And it was interesting. So the dissertation was one that was not hard to get up every morning to be working on that, because I enjoyed the topic, and I enjoyed the intellectual give-and-take with faculty there who were the best in the business in terms of doing things like that.

SR: That’s very exciting.

SLW: It was.

SR: And at the time that you were doing that, what was Susan doing?

SLW: Susan was teaching in Elkhart. We were typical young married folks. It’s not an unusual experience. Somehow it seemed like we had more disposable income at that time in our lives than almost any other time. Because of course we didn’t have children, housing didn’t cost very much. Recreation was occasionally often to go into Chicago, stay at the Palmer House for a weekend, do some theater, visit
SR: Yeah. Okay, you got your doctorate in 1969. So you were there during the later sixties.

SLW: Yes.

SR: And what was Notre Dame like? What was the impact of what was going on?

SLW: Now of course we’re in the Vietnam War, there are demonstrations on campus—I shouldn’t say daily—probably once a week. I remember being in a number of those demonstrations. They were typically demonstrations against military recruitment or against the CIA coming—sort of anti-recruitment demonstrations as well as more broadly-based anti-war demonstrations. Sometimes civil rights demonstrations. Those were sort of the issues of that time. It was a politically engaged campus. But the political engagement for almost all of the people there—and I don’t mean to overstate that—was within a context of their Catholic faith. And so it was sort of a peace and justice theme that led many of them into those demonstrations.

SR: Oh, interesting. What about the feminist movement?

SLW: Well, we’re talking about Notre Dame. At that time there were not any women at .... Well, that’s not true.

SR: Did it change?

SLW: No, there were no undergraduate women at Notre Dame. There was Saint Mary’s, which was a women’s college across the street. But there were women in my graduate programs. All I want to say at this time there were probably twenty-
five of us pursuing doctorates, (There might have been more that who I didn’t interact with), and I think three of them were women. (recording paused)

Part of being young marrieds at Notre Dame, and part of being at Notre Dame, was football. One of the things that Susan, forty-six years later, has not forgiven me for, is that I remember on the first fall we were there a bunch of graduate students, after class, we went over to get our season football tickets, because you could get a very reasonable price for football tickets. And I bought one—not two—I bought one, because I did not imagine that Susan would be particularly interested, and she was often away coaching debate on weekends, and things like that. But what I had not understood was that football was the major social event of the year among graduate students. And so I didn’t make that mistake again.

SR: That’s very interesting, because of course Notre Dame, everybody knows….

SLW: Yeah, football was part of that tradition, sure.

SR: That’s very interesting. So after you completed your dissertation, what was the next step?

SLW: Well, really the next step was looking for a job. And that was really not so much after, but during, of course, that last year. So you begin to go to professional meetings, the American Philosophic Association. You begin to do interviews. Susan and I were very much wanted to be in New England, so we focused our job interviews in the Northeast. I was really pleased when I got an opportunity to interview at the University of Maine. So I went off to an interview. Typically these interviews take place in January and February. So I
flew by to Bangor, Maine, and then was taken to Orono, which is about ten miles away. And I stayed with the chair of the philosophy department, and his wife, in their home. And I got snowed in! That’s probably why I had a chance to get that job, because I ended up spending, I think, three or four days with them. I ended up babysitting for them, all sorts of things you had not otherwise expected.

SR: That’s great!

SLW: Bob and Judy Tredwell. And in fact, we just had a farewell gala here at SDSU just a few weeks ago, and Bob and Judy came from Maine for that gala, and they have been very good friends and mentors through the whole period our lives.

SR: That’s lovely.

SLW: So we were offered the job at Maine. I was offered $9,000. And one of the other graduate students had accepted an offer for $9,500 at another university. Of course I was completely obtuse with regard to cost of living and all those other things. But I had it in my head that I wasn’t going to accept an offer for less than $9,500. And so that commenced a long and anxious negotiation, because on the one hand, I said, “No, I’ve gotta have $9,500.” On the other hand, I really wanted to go to Maine. Susan and I were eager to do that. And again, one of those dumb lucky things, is that they made the offer at $9,500 and we accepted it.

And so then we got in Susan’s blue Volkswagen beetle and drove from South Bend to Orono, Maine. I should back up and say that I at that time was
driving—backing up now, way to the University of Colorado—I was driving an
MG. It was an MG TF-1500, which is just a yummy MG, between the MG-TD
and the MG-A. It was just only produced for a couple of years—a beautiful,
beautiful car. A, which as we got married, we first of all didn’t need two cars,
and that car didn’t make very much sense—and so I sold the MG that car, we
used the money to pay off Susan’s Volkswagen beetle, which became our car then
for many, many years. But it was a difficult thing to give up that MG.

SR: I can hear it!

SLW: So Susan and I, as I said, drove to Maine—; took probably three days. I’ve forgotten whether we had a trailer behind the car or not, but we probably
did, stopping along the way at several different places. I remember one, we
spent a night in Rumford, Maine, and the lady there grew violets, and I think
also Christmas cactus. She was really intrigued with the thought that we were
going off to start this new adventure, so she gave us cuttings from these plants,
which we had for many, many years. And we went to live in Orono in an
apartment in Mr. Kelly’s house on Main Street —

---------- We went into this great old apartment with a big slate sink. And instead
of what you would recognize now as faucets, it had two separate faucets with
hoses that came down to a joint nozzle in the middle; a big old claw-foot tub. It
had a fireplace, which is what really attracted us to the place.

SR: Sounds wonderful!

SLW: It was just great. Mr. Kelly lived upstairs. So we got settled there. I had the
really good fortune of being with a great philosopher—really great. Now.
philosophy departments are tend to be pretty small, so there were six of us, I think, at that time. But Bob Tredwell was the chair. And he said to me, “I’m not going to assign you to any committees for your first year, but you have to come to every meeting of the College of Arts and Sciences and sit next to me, and I’ll explain what’s going on.” And that’s why you’re doing this interview, right now? Because you young faculty members rarely get a chance to have that sort of window into terms of how universities work. It was Bob Tredwell that started doing that on the path that led to San Diego State.

Now, it also happened that Bob then became the Assistant to the President of the University of Maine a couple of years later. Also in that our philosophy department was a man named Ralph Yum-Hjelm [phonetic] who had been an academic dean. Soon to join the department—not yet—but soon to join the department was Jefferson White, who had also been an academic dean. So I was surrounded with some very savvy colleagues, and they were really, really helpful in my beginning to understand how universities worked. And I became involved in academic governance, what you would think of today as the University Senate, but there it was called the Council of Colleges.

And then one of the things that was for me a very nice experience was after Bob stepped down as Assistant to the President, there was a subsequent other assistant to the president. And when that person was getting ready to leave, the President of the University of Maine, or really his cabinet, was looking for the next Assistant to the President, and they sent out letters to about a dozen of us saying, “Would you consider such a thing [i.e. being a

I wrote back and said, “Absolutely not. I have integrity. Don’t you understand this?” My colleagues hastened to assure me that I did not have integrity, and that given my interest in how universities work, this being Assistant to the President was a natural expression of that interest, which hadn’t occurred to me. It frankly, Fortunately, it occurred to my colleagues. And I still have the letter I wrote saying, “No, I’m not interested in this job.”

And Howard Neville was the name of the president. To my amazement, he offered me the job. I remember saying, “I really don’t understand why, (with these other folks that who are so good), you want me.” And he said, “Well, you’re right, they know more than you do now, but six months from now, you’ll know more than they.”

SR: That’s terrific.

SLW: Exactly. And it was true. It was just a great move, wonderful mentors. Good people to work with. But again now, you couldn’t find a better place to understand a university, than being Assistant to the President. You get to “see the whole board” again. That experience was very formative in the whole process that ended in my coming to San Diego State.

SR: Okay, so you’re in Maine, and we’re talking about the 1970s now?

SLW: Yes.

SR: End of the sixties, 1970s. I was just thinking, did you get involved also in the state—I mean, the interaction between, just as you have to deal with here in California—the state and the budget and all those things?
SLW: Absolutely. I did.

I should back up and say we’ve left out my teaching. It was a wonderful philosophy department, good colleagues. One of the great things we did was, we had an introductory course called “Philosophy and Modern Life,” which was taught—this was a large course of like 200 students, that and it was team taught. We would put two of us together, typically a more senior colleague and a younger person like myself, and we would together choose a topic that we were interested in having a sustained discussion about. So it was like a protracted debate. It was very, very nice. And for me, again, very formative, because I got to see some really experienced people, and I got to learn a lot about that from them. I was a good teacher. I was brought, in part, to do medieval philosophy and metaphysics and things like that, which is what was consistent with my graduate work. But before long I had a chance to do a course in existentialism—just subbing for somebody who was on sabbatical. And I loved the existentialism course. And unlike—it’s very hard to get students terribly enthusiastic about Thomas Aquinas or the Middle Ages, but they were, particularly at that time, incredibly enthusiastic about existentialism. So that was just a sheer pleasure.

And another part of the existentialism which was pleasant—this is going back even to graduate school—that was the time of coffeehouses. And I would occasionally go to coffeehouses not to read poetry, but to read philosophy, and by and large existential philosophy, so Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, people like that—Sartre. But as I said, I was good at what I did there. I got
that received, as you mentioned earlier, the Outstanding Humanities Teacher Award. That was part of a PHIPS FIPSE grant, that funded those awards. I received a cash prize of $500, with which I bought a table saw, which I’m right now packing up to take to Maine; and a Wilson T-3000 tennis racket, which was hot stuff then.

SR: Are you a tennis player?

SLW: I was. I was a tennis player. I’m not now, but I was, and enjoyed that very much. So I was good at teaching, which was one of the reasons why it hadn’t occurred to me that my avocation of administration at the university was where I might want to ultimately end up. Even then, when you go to become the Assistant to the President, that’s not really a career move. That’s a dabble. But that dabble then led at one point to becoming a dean at another university. That’s sort of where you declare to the administrative, in that move. Because when you’re an Assistant to the President, you can always go back to the faculty, and people will can forgive you for that lapse.

SR: Well, that’s a great opportunity to decide.

SLW: Oh it is! That’s exactly what it served for me, was a chance to see that process.

SR: That’s very interesting. I find it interesting. When you look at a c.v. [curriculum vitae], you see dates and you see what you did, but it’s so enlightening to understand the process of what really happens so that this came about.

SLW: Well also, at this time— as you said we are in the seventies,— of my— This is the time of the Cambodian invasion; this is the time of Kent State; campuses
are being shut down, boycotted. There’s a wonderful photo I have of some colleagues and me leading an anti-war march through Orono, an anti-war march. One of my first experiences with politics was about a dozen of us signed a letter to the Bangor Daily News, a full-page ad kind of letter, calling for Nixon’s impeachment—something [of which] I’m quite proud, because this is sort of pre the general call for his impeachment, way pre Watergate. But I was amazed that some of my colleagues then didn’t want to talk to me anymore. It was an interesting thing. It’s not that it bothered me, but it surprised me. It just hadn’t occurred to me, literally. that in this small town, people that would cross over to the other side of the street to avoid saying hello to me. But that was the nature of those times, in terms of The war was very divisive on campuses.

SR: Oh yes. (recording paused) Tell me a little bit about Orono and where it is, and what it’s like there.

SLW: The first thing to understand is it’s a small town of about, I’m guessing, 12,000 to 15,000 people, of whom 9,000 are students. It’s a small, small college town, about ten miles north of Bangor. But the more important thing to know is that the University of Maine, Orono is— it’s a land grant campus. The Morrill Act, which established the land-grant universities in 1865, I think it was set up that expression of the Morrill Act in Maine was not unlike many other states at that time, which was it allowed the sale of public lands to raise the money to develop these campuses universities. And they were largely looking to be applied. The Morrill Act felt that we needed college-based citizenry that was not just preparing for the ministry or something like that. So the University of
Maine at Orono was the land-grant campus, which was the big campus within the system and the state. There were other little campuses spread around, but Orono was the kind of campus that could support a philosophy department, that did research, that was involved in agricultural extension activities around the state, all those kinds of things.

SR: Very nice. So as you proceeded going on into doing more with administration, what were the next steps that led you towards here?

SLW: Well, the next step was….

SR: New York?

SLW: Well, as I said, I became a dean at Fairfield University.

SR: Ah, that’s next.

SLW: And I was there for five years. Our kids were now in elementary school. Our kids were both born in Maine.

SR: I was just going to say, let’s go back a minute, tell me about the kids.

SLW: Yes! I should! Rick was born on July 1, 1971. And Matt came along three years later. So we have two sons, both born in Maine. For us, Maine is home. People often wonder about that. They ask if we’re from Maine. And the answer is no, but Maine is where we developed those early professional relationships with other young colleagues. It’s where our kids were born, where we owned our first home. All those sorts of things. And as life has unfolded, we were able to buy some land on the coast of Maine. It took us a while to pay that off, and then we built a summer home there. And that home has been constant for us while we moved around the rest of the country.
SR: Oh, how lovely.

SLW: So that’s Maine’s home, and that’s home for our kids, and for us. By the time we went to Fairfield, Rick and Matt were in elementary school, Riverside Elementary School, not very far away from our house—walkable, from the house as I guess suppose, as elementary schools are intended to be. And the house was not very far from the university. Of should say one of the things my mother did, when we went to the University of Maine, for that fall, the next spring, the spring of 1970, she bought me a bike, a really nice Raleigh three-speed bike, because that was the perfect way to get to and from campus. In Fairfield we were still a one-car family, and continued to be a one-car family for many, many years. So I would ride to and from campus in Fairfield as I had in Orono on my bike, and I just now asked the theater department whether they would want an old three-speed bike, and they do!, to my great pleasure. So I will give them that bike, because I’ve still got it.

SR: I’m familiar with that particular bike too.

SLW: Yeah. Great old bike. That was sort of the academic bike of the time. But when we were in Fairfield, we were about a mile and a half from the campus also—really kind of at the base of the hill; the campus was up at the top of the hill. So I would ride my bike to work every morning up the hill, and had that wonderful, delightful feeling of coasting home after work in the evening. It was a very nice kind of way to proceed. Again, still a one-car family at that time. I think the car then was a Volari [phonetic] station wagon, to reflect, two young kids in suburbia.
In Fairfield, Susan was very active as a docent in the Mill Stream-Plain River Project. I’ll have to check on the exact name of that.

SR: What is that?

SLW: There’s a river that runs along through Fairfield, and this is a wonderful program where the school kids are taken out to the river every year for a different kind of curriculum. The kindergartners are allowed to sort of see soil erosion, by pouring water in sandboxes. And then the next year they’ll be doing something else; then the next year; right on up through the whole elementary school curriculum. And so Susan would work with those folks. She was also doing advertising/marketing work in New York City, which she enjoyed, because Fairfield’s a commuter town from New York City.

SR: What are the neighboring towns?

SLW: On the east, Bridgeport; on the west…. Well, let me see, Stamford, Westport towns like that.

SR: Yeah, it’s beautiful. I’m familiar with it.

SLW: Yeah, it’s very nice, right on Long Island Sound. But Susan likes to say that she never made much money in her work in advertising, but she was really well dressed. And she was. So she would go to and from the city on the train.

SR: Where did she work?

SLW: A couple different companies, but it was mostly advertising and market research, so she was working as a freelancer with different companies. We also gorged ourselves on theater then, because one thing Maine didn’t have was much theater. The first year we were there, we saw twenty-six plays in the first year. But it
wasn’t just New York City, it was the Long Wharf Regional Theater, it was the Yale Rep; these are all available there.

So I’m now a young dean at Fairfield University. Fairfield is a Jesuit university. In fact, one of my concerns was, when I was called up, and asked to come down for an interview, I said, “There must be some mistake, I’ve already gotten a rejection letter from you.” And there was a mistake, I had a rejection letter from them. I said, “So before we continue this call, why don’t you go back and check your records.” But in any event, we went down there. I took that job really as—the first time we—I mean, we expected to be moving when we were graduate students. But this was the first time we made, really, a professional move.

Susan very much enjoyed Fairfield, Connecticut. It’s a very nice place to live.

SR: A very nice location, yeah.

SLW: And I found being a dean really interesting. I was not a Catholic, so I had to kind of understand that culture. But I’d learned some of it from Notre Dame. One of my first concerns during the interview was that they had looked at my degree from Notre Dame and my dissertation topic and reached the wrong conclusion.

So I had to make that clear before we went further. But that worked out fine, and we had five years there, which were very good years, I learned a lot. Deanships are nice jobs because you’re really working very directly with students and with faculty and programs, I enjoyed it.

Then we went off to Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota. Now our kids are in elementary school and junior high. Saint Cloud was a town of about 40,000 people then. A wonderful place to raise two sons. They could get on their
bikes and go anywhere. It was absolutely safe. Great schools. Minnesota has really, really good schools; a great work ethic; a good social capital kind of environment. Just a really good place to raise the kids, and we enjoyed that. Susan was also doing some advertising work. She became the Chairperson of their St. Cloud’s annual summer festival there called the “Wheels, Wings, and Water Festival”. In fact, the first parade we ever were in, sort of riding in a car, I was Susan’s date. Susan was the president of this thing—president’s not right—director of it, or whatever—and so I was her date, and she was busy waving and doing all that sort of thing. Since then we’ve had to be in a number of different parades. Susan is not parade friendly.

But in any event, Susan was working in advertising with Thelan Feeland [phonetic] Advertising at that time. And then she was also teaching at Saint Cloud State in the communications department. While we were in Fairfield, she had picked up her master’s degree in communication.

So there, we were living a really Minnesota lifestyle. Minnesota is, obviously, very, very cold in the winter, but people are well adapted to it. So there was in downtown St. Cloud a little lake—really a big pond—that was frozen, of course, and they would clear the ice, and they had a warming house, and Susan loved to go down there in the evenings while our kids Rick and Matt were in the library at swim practice, or someplace else to ice skate, do things like that.

Even in Maine, our kids had played hockey, but by the time we got to Saint Cloud, they were already very accomplished swimmers, and so Rick began to
swim on the high school varsity swim team when he was still in junior high. Subsequently, Matthew did as well. And the reason that turned out to be really fortunate, for us is on the one hand, by and large swimmers are pretty good kids. And secondly, it’s an exhausting sport. And if you’ve got two young males around the house, it’s better to have them tired than not. But what became important later on, which we hadn’t understood, is that when we moved into the presidency at SUNY-Oswego, a visible job in a small town, Rick and Matthew each had their own identities. They had their own accomplishments as swimmers, so that was really helpful—I mean, very, very helpful to both of them as we went along.

But we were in Saint Cloud for four years. I worked with a president named Brendon McDonald, also a very good mentor. Brendon was a Canadian. He had come down from Canada to play hockey at Saint Cloud State as a student. So he was an alum of Saint Cloud State. He had been involved in higher education: he’d been a president of another universityinstitution, before being president at Saint Cloud. He was very knowledgeable and experienced, but he also didn’t want to be the academic vice-president. He had already done that. And this is a case where the chemistry between the president and the chief academic officer is really critical. Brendon and I just had a very good chemistry. He was absolutely comfortable letting me run academic affairs. That—which is one of the things I’ve tried to do then with the chief academic officers who have worked with me when I’ve served as president, i.e. given them freedom to do their important job.
One of the things that was for Brendon and me, a stories he used to love to tell, was about when I was interviewing at St. Cloud, there — these interviews for such positions are usually two- or three-day events, as are the ones that are going on right now for my successor. And in this case, I met Brendon him early on in the interview process, then and went through the meetings with various campus constituencies and everything. But the last thing was going to be a breakfast meeting [i.e., exit interview] with him. We met in a small room in the student union. The catering staff provided breakfast. There was a person taking care of our needs. And we had a very nice, and comfortable conversation. And after I left, the young woman who was serving us, who was not just studying communications, but studying nonverbal communications, said — having watched these different candidates in this same setting — said, “He’s the one you’re going to hire.” And Brendon said, “Well, that’s silly; I don’t know which one I’m going to hire.” And she said, “No, he’s the one you’re going to hire, because it’s very clear you’re very comfortable with him.” And it was true, Brendon and I worked very well together.

SR: Isn’t that interesting?

SLW: There are a lot of these things, when you get to these senior administrative positions, you’re searches are usually not choosing between competence and incompetence — you’re looking for the one that fits, that complements the needs of the university, someone with whom that you can work with, et cetera. And Brendon was a very good colleague in that regard, but particularly a good
colleague in the sense of letting me do academic affairs and not second guessing it.

SR: That’s terrific.

SLW: Yeah, I’ve been very fortunate in my mentors—really very fortunate.

SR: And it’s so great to have you sharing this about mentors, because it’s so relevant in all of our lives.

SLW: Absolutely, yeah.

SR: It really is. As you mentioned, the relationships with the other couples in Maine and Connecticut, did you form friendships there too?

SLW: Yes. That’s an interesting thing to talk about, because when we were in Maine and forming those friendships, we had no administrative authority over anybody. Susan and I often remind ourselves…. There was an evening after we’d been in Fairfield, Connecticut, for maybe six or seven months, in which Susan said, “We don’t have any friends anymore.” And part of that’s because we left, and so we’re just making new friends; and part of it was that we were in that process of trying out friends and finding out that they don’t fit. But also we were coming to grips with the fact that our administrative authority—responsibility changes our relationships with people.

SR: I understand that.

SLW: So the same thing would carry on in Minnesota. We had friends whose kids were also swimmers, so we had those relationships. We had neighbors, we had those relationships. But they were quite different than the kinds of initial friendships that you make under different circumstances.
SR: Yeah, I understand that. That’s interesting, yeah. Then we go to Oswego.

SLW: Right. One of the things about being an academic vice-president is there’s one academic vice-president on every campus. And there’s one president on every campus. Most presidents come up through academic affairs, being chief academic officers—“most” meaning probably 80-90%. So that means that chief academic officers are sort of presidents-in-waiting. Now, there are obviously exceptions, but I was very fortunate to have, in Brendon McDonald, a person who saw me as a president-in-waiting. To give you a sense of that, just as I was talking about how Bob Tredwell would sit with me and explain what was going on in college meetings, there’s a group called AASCU, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, a group of which I later became Board chair, of, that you mentioned when our interview began. At that time, there was a man named Allen O’Au[phonetic]t—er, who was the president of AASCU—and this is an association of the presidents of public universities in the United States—and Brendon was active in AASCU. He invited Allen to come to campus to make some remarks about public higher education, but he said, “Steve, I want you to drive down to the airport and pick up Allen, because that’ll give you two hours with him, and he needs to know who you are, and you need to know who he is.” It was just a perceptive thing to do. It was a wonderful thing to do. Allan and I became good friends.

Then when it was time for me to start thinking about applying for presidencies, Brendon suggested, “Why don’t you, the next time you’re in...
Washington, stop by, talk with their [AASCU’s] headhunters, not about any particular job, but just make sure they all know who you are, show them your résumé, let them critique it.” Really good, helpful suggestions.

So there came a time then that we were ready to look for a presidency. I only spent four years as a chief academic officer. Now part of the reason for that is that I had opportunities to pursue presidencies. But part of the reason, frankly, is that’s [i.e. Chief Academic Officer] the hardest job on campus. It’s much harder than a presidency. And I marvel at, in our case, Nancy Marlin-[phonetic], who’s our chief academic officer. That’s a genuinely demanding job, and it’s a job in which you get very little public reinforcement. Most people don’t understand the work of chief academic officers. - In presidencies, you get lots of public reinforcement and status, not so for AVP’s. So I was fortunate there again to have a really good mentor who was looking out for my interests and saying, “You need to meet some of these people, and do things like that.”

SR: That’s very interesting. Would you like to—and maybe you’ll do this later—but I’d like to hear more about what makes it so difficult—that role.

SLW: Well, yes. First of all, it’s a role that controls a major portion of the expenditures of the university, in terms of what we call the general fund budget, which kind of runs the normal operations, separating out food service, and residence halls, etc.—but the normal academic university operations. You probably have 75-80% of the whole show as chief academic officer. You have the most politically volatile part of the university, because you can get votes of no confidence from faculty members. —You don’t get them typically from other employees. So it’s
Academic Affairs is far more politically charged and politically sensitive. And the issues with collective bargaining and things like that tend to bear there in a different way than they do in others. But it’s also the place that makes decisions about promotion and tenure, makes decisions about hiring. Those are pretty consequential decisions. Say, hypothetically, “Well, we’ve got the capacity here to hire twenty-five more faculty members next year.” And that decision would be made with the president. “Okay, we can do twenty-five more faculty [members].” But where you put those positions is pretty much your—the chief academic officer’s decision—at least that’s the way Brenda and I did it—and how Nancy and I did it. Now in that circumstance, you need sixty-eight positions, but you’ve only got twenty-five. So you’ve got the AVP has to decide, “Well, it’s more important that we put a position over here in Economics, than over there in Chemistry;” or whatever; or vice versa. So those are tough decisions.

The same thing is true in terms of most of the admission decisions that are ultimately done in academic affairs, student admissions, or student denials. So you have those critical issues.

And you’re putting out fires. I liked to joke that, so it’s a good job for people with a short attention span, as is the presidency. So there’s a lot of stuff going on.

But the stuff there [in Academic Affairs] is often negative; while in a presidency, the stuff is often positive. I talk about myself as an “institutional hood ornament”, but that’s the nature of a presidency. As a president, you get back to what
brought you into higher education in the first place, which is you get to work with students.

Last night I was with presidential scholars that are about to be graduating. Recently I’ve been with some of our guardian scholars. These are very satisfying moments a chief academic officer typically doesn’t get to enjoy, because that person’s busy putting out fires and reviewing promotion and tenure documents, and all that sort of stuff etc.

SR: Okay, that clarifies it very well. (tape turned off and on) So are you still teaching philosophy during this time?

SLW: I taught philosophy as a dean. I would teach one course a year through extended studies. Extended studies is a way you often hire adjuncts, and you’re teaching evening courses. And I would do it without compensation. And I taught less frequently, only very occasionally, at Saint Cloud State. And I missed teaching in both those cases. When I went to Oswego, I think I taught two or three courses during the whole time I was there. Maybe not even that, maybe two. But you see, at this point now, this is not the best use of your time. It’s more of a personal indulgence to do those courses. That’s not what the university’s paying me for. So while it’s personally satisfying, it’s just not fair to the taxpayers of New York, or subsequently the state of California, for me to be doing that. But in the time I’ve been here at San Diego State, I’ve only taught one regular course, and I did that when the philosophy department was without a person to teach. They had nobody else to teach it.
that year, and so I said I’d be happy to do it. But by and large, I just don’t get a chance to do that anymore.

SR: Okay. I notice here that you were the interim provost for academic affairs, State University of New York System in Albany, and that was 1995-1996, which is during the same timeframe that you’re at Oswego, and that kind of confused me.

SLW: It is Understandably. Let me back up, because we’ve talked about Saint Cloud State, and Brendon’s support. Then I get hired to be the president at SUNY-Oswego. And this is a very nice thing: Susan’s busy doing her work—in fact, when I was hired there, she was at a conference in Tacoma, Washington. So we found out about this on the phone. Oswego This is part of the State University of New York. At each of those campuses there’s a local group called the College Council that recommends the president to the chancellor of the system. There are sixty-four campuses in the SUNY system, so the chancellor can’t be personally conducting searches. But the chancellor meets those finalists and “blesses” them. The chancellor was a person named Bruce Johnstone [phonetic] from Minnesota, previously president of SUNY’s College at Buffalo—the College of Buffalo, as opposed to the University of Buffalo. Bruce — became another very, very good friend, and also a good mentor and supporter. So Susan and I But we traveled to Oswego for an interview. The president there had been Virginia Radley, my predecessor. She was the first female president in the whole sixty-four-campus system of SUNY.

SR: I remember the name.
SLW: Remarkable woman, a woman who was very uncomfortable in the presidency, but I think took it on because there had to be a female president, and she was in a position to do it. So she did it more, I think, as a statement than as something she personally enjoyed. She was single, she lived in a big old house, which we then lived in ourselves, on the shore of Lake Ontario. The SUNY-Oswego campus is north of Syracuse, probably roughly thirty miles north of Syracuse, right on the shore of Lake Ontario. Beautiful setting, big old house built by the founding president, President Sheldon—built in 1857, as a matter of fact, even before the campus was founded. The campus then subsequently became the area, probably 700 acres, around his house. So there’s that old house. She was a single woman, alone in this big, dark, old house on the edge of the campus. When I first toured the house, there was a rifle laying across the television set, and a shotgun standing up in the corner. And that was, I’m told, the way she entertained, because she wanted people to know that she had guns there. And that, I presume, is because she felt deeply uncomfortable and vulnerable in that setting.

Interestingly enough, when I was interviewed for the presidency at Oswego, the first question I was asked was, “Do you carry a gun?” Well, that’s because Virginia did carry a gun. She wanted everybody to know she carried a gun. But that goes back to this is a difficult role, and a woman….

SR: That’s fascinating.

SLW: Fascinating woman! Wonderfully intelligent, articulate, capable woman, but thrusting herself into a role she did not enjoy.
SR: I know her name is familiar to me.

SLW: It is, because she’s one of the earlier female presidents.

SR: Wow, that’s really something!

SLW: So we were in Oswego for seven years, and that was a very good experience.

And I was in no hurry to leave Oswego—at least I didn’t feel I was in a hurry to leave Oswego. OBut on the other hand, there’s a natural half-life to these positions. And The campus was prospering, and we were doing well. Then Bruce Johnstone, the chancellor, became seriously ill. Before long, there was a new chancellor named Tom Bartlett. BAnd both of these people play important roles, both as friends and mentors, and then they show up later in the story. And I remember saying to Susan, “Bartlett’s going to call me and ask me to become the interim provost.” Now, I have no idea how I knew that, and of course I didn’t know it, but I just somehow intuited it. I hadn’t spent any time with Bartlett, but I knew that Bruce thought highly of my work, and I presumed that Bartlett, needing a provost, would ask Bruce’s advice. SAnd sure enough, a couple of days later the phone rings, and it’s Tom Bartlett saying, “I’d like you to come down and talk with me about being the interim provost.” And I did that. A And a couple of days later the phone rang again, and he said, “I’d like you to be the interim provost. I’d like you to start immediately.” And I was down in Albany, probably within forty-eight hours of [accepting] the new job. HAnd here again, I was very fortunate in my mentors, because Tom Bartlett had been the chancellor of the Alabama system, he’d been the chancellor of the Oregon system. He had had several university presidencies. He was a very
experienced guy. He was older—I think by the time I met him, he was in his late sixties. This was a very tumultuous time in SUNY, because the person—governor who hired Bartlett was Mario Cuomo—or, more properly, he was hired by the Board that was largely appointed by when Mario Cuomo.... Now Mario Cuomo was running for his fourth term as governor. It never occurred to Mario Cuomo that he wouldn’t be re-elected—an interesting phenomenon. But of course he wasn’t re-elected. Now what was interesting about that is that Cuomo was always slow about filling vacancies on the board—not just the SUNY board, but on most boards. I happen to know that, because the person who did his appointments was an alum of SUNY-Oswego. So, And when Cuomo was not re-elected, it turned out that there were something like seven vacancies on the board. And, under New York statutes, the governor appoints the chair of the board. So virtually overnight, the board flipped. And I don’t mean flipped politically, although it happened to flip from a Democratic governor to a Republican governor. But it flipped from an experienced board.... The boards are designed not to flip. They’re designed to have seven- or eight-year terms for their members, and so you can get to come on a board and have time understand how the operation works. Over time, there’s intended to be some continuity. In the case of New York, that continuity was broken. You had a new group of trustees in power who had very different philosophies, but who in fact didn’t even know what the questions were. They happened to have answers, but they didn’t know what the questions were. So it was a difficult time.
Tom was just spectacularly patient. For a long time he thought he could help these new trustees understand what the university was, and what its role was in the state. So that proved ultimately to be a false hope. And they were busy driving him out, and eventually did drive him out. When you ask about the chronology, that eighth year in New York was the year that I was down in Albany. So originally I was asked to come down for the fall semester, and took an apartment in Albany to do that. But then before long I was asked if I’d stay for the whole year, and I said, “Well, I’m not going to stay for the whole year and commute back and forth to Oswego every weekend. So we need to bring Susan down here, and we need, obviously, more than a one-bedroom apartment to make that work.” So we did that, I stayed for the year.

And now my very happy time in Oswego had been broken by this experience. And it sort of freed me up to be looking for something else, for considering something else. Also, my credentials had changed, because now I was a system officer, chief academic officer of the largest system in the country, which gave me experiences I would not have had as the president of SUNY-Oswego.

Remind me to talk about Deborah Stanley in a minute.

But then I was enjoying this work, but it was obviously interim. So I was thinking about what I wanted to do. And then I was approached by a headhunter who asked if I would be interested in this position. And the truth was, I didn’t know, and I didn’t know very much about California. And California universities had a

reputation of hiring people from California, and folks east of the Rockies didn’t often get these positions. So I didn’t think it was very real, frankly.

Barry Munitz was the chancellor of California State University System at the time. And what I presume happened then, was in looking for who could do this job, Barry called SUNY, because SUNY would have had the biggest farm team of presidents in the country. And Tom Bartlett said to Barry, “You ought to look at Steve Weber.”

Well, then the interesting thing that happened was then, Barry called Bruce Johnstone, now recovering from his illness, and Bruce said the same thing. So I had two folks who had been the chancellors in that system who recommended me, which I think is what put me in a position of being seriously considered by Barry. Plus now I now had the system experience.

Before I get back to Debra, I need to say another…. Part of the challenge of San Diego State—we’ll have to return to this later—but just in this context, is we’re very different than many of the campuses in the CSU system. Every one of these campuses is different, but when you’re chancellor of the system and you’re trying to make decisions that serve the system, those decisions often don’t serve San Diego State, because we’re very different. So there’s always a tension between the system and this campus. Roberta Atkinson, who was the chair of the CSU Board at the time, asked me once why Charlie and I fight so much. And I said, “Because we’re both doing our job.” And I think that’s exactly right. I mention this because my predecessor, Tom Day, had also had some system experience, and I think was originally perceived
as a person who would be sympathetic to the system, and would not be such a fierce advocate for the campus. That proved to be false expectation. His predecessor, Brage Golding, was exactly the same—at least thinks he was perceived by the system as a person who would be more compliant—also a false expectation. And I’m absolutely certain I was perceived to be that, because there I was a system officer, et cetera. Right now, when you talk to people on campus, that’s one of the concerns, is how will the next president handle the relationship between the campus and its own integrity, versus the system and its needs. And it’s a job that this person [i.e. the new president of SDSU] has to handle.

SR: And both President Golding and President Day spoke a lot about this.

SLW: Of course, yes, exactly.

SR: Yes. You mentioned Deborah Stanley.

SLW: Oh, I want to go back to that, because it’s something that when I went to SUNY-Oswego, I had to find an Assistant to the President. And I interviewed two or three, maybe four or five people, and none of them were right. And then into my office came Deborah Stanley, who was an attorney, taught in our School of Business, taught business law and things like that, and she was spectacularly good. So that within a half hour, I ceased interviewing her and was trying to sell her on the job. And there again, a lot of my career has been just luck, because a lot much of the success I had at Oswego is due to having a really good assistant. And Deborah knew the territory, understood it better than I
did, was politically astute the way a legally-trained people are, and she and I became a very good team.

SR: That’s great.

SLW: And I mention that because then when we lost our provost, Jane Milley [phonetic], I appointed Deborah as the interim Provost; and then she became the Provost. And now I’m headed down to SUNY, having just been called for the Interim Provost system position. And part of what I said to Tom Bartlett is, “Yeah, but you’re going to need an interim person at Oswego, and you really ought to choose Deborah Stanley.” So Deborah then followed me as the interim Provost. But then what happened is, she became the President. And she has done a spectacular job there ever since.

So I was really pleased that as it happened I could leave that campus, in which Susan and I invested seven years, in very good hands. And as I was saying, she’s served that campus really well, and is still the president there now. So she’s served it as the interim President the year I was away in Albany, plus the last fifteen years. Susan and I were back there just last fall to tour the campus and see some of the wonderful changes made there. It’s been a good, successful presidency, and a pleasure to sort of watch that campus develop under Deborah’s leadership.

SR: That’s great. And it’s great that you brought on somebody who you could feel so good about.
SLW: Yeah. But just as I never imagined that there was a university presidency in my future, she didn’t imagine that, at first, either, but she’s just been very well suited for it. (recording turned off and on)

While I was then at the SUNY System office, I was approached about doing this job. As I said, I became kind of interested in doing this job as I learned more about San Diego State. And I was then invited to be one of twelve finalists. This was an unusual process. and it was in November. at that time. Twelve of us were brought to Newport Beach—not to the campus here, but to Newport Beach. We were put in separate hotels, so we wouldn’t see each other. (because they wanted to keep us... And it’s a small club, so we would have likely known each other) And asked, “What are you doing here?” We were interviewed and I flew back to New York after that. Then Monday or Tuesday, we get a call and now there’s six we’d like to come back for another interview. So I came back, and this was—you know kind of what it’s like to go, spend forty-eight hours, go back. So it was an exhausting process. Then I was called for a third time, saying that they wanted me to come back again. Now there were three of us. And I said, “You know, I’m not prepared to consider a presidency when I haven’t even been able to visit the campus. I’m just not. I don’t feel right about that.” Then they said, “Well, we’re not doing presidential visits.” And I said, “Then you ought to just cross me off the list.” Then I got a call saying, “Well, we don’t want to cross you off the list. Let us try something else.” So they let me tour the campus, not with a university employee, but with an employee named Davene Gibson from one of

our auxiliaries, from our research foundation, named Davine Gibson [phonetic]. And Davine is an alumna and a wonderful, wonderful woman. And so my introduction to San Diego State, still as a candidate, was with Davine. So she walks me around campus, and I’m anonymous. I don’t have any of the public interviews that are going on now, no big fora, all those things, which are part of the right way to select a university president. In my case, there was a very small committee of campus representatives that meet with me in these interviews up in Newport Beach—but not the normal sort of thing. So it’s Davine who introduced me to San Diego State, in the process. I think it was before my second visit, not my third. Davine was very helpful in making me say, “Yeah, I really would like to do this job.”

Then one of the candidates withdrew, so there were two of us left. The person who was the other candidate, was a person I had known professionally and very much admired. But I didn’t know at the time that she was the other candidate. But she would have been an outstanding president—has been an outstanding president throughout her career. But in any event, I came out. And the way this works then is you interview with the Board, and the Board makes the decision—on the advice of the Chancellor—while you wait in the hotel room for the phone to ring one way or the other. So the phone rang saying that I had the job, and that they would come by and pick me up in twenty minutes.

We go over to be formally introduced to the Board now, and to the public, as the next president of San Diego State. And so I called Susan in the interim, to let her know the news. I think I called Deborah maybe also.
Maybe I called Deborah afterwards, because we didn’t have much time. So in any event, I went over and was introduced and had a chance to meet Tom Day in Barry Munitz’s office, just a quick conversation with Tom.

So that was the first part of this. But the thing that’s interesting about it is it was in mid-December. So I was appointed in mid-December to take the job in July of the next year. That’s a long transition, a long interim. I mention that because I was then asked by the SUNY Board, before they knew that I’d done this accepted the SDSU post. I was asked to be the provost. And I’ve always been so pleased that I had already made this commitment, because I might have been tempted by that. But And SUNY was such a quagmire in those years that it would have been disastrous. Again, dumb luck that these things worked out as they did.

So then we had a long transition. Tom, very rightly, said (He was concerned, because it was December, and he was still in charge of the university.) “There’s only one president of San Diego State.” Since you know him, you can hear him saying that. And that’s exactly right. I said, “I really believe that that’s exactly right. But remember that’s true after July, just as it is before July.” And Tom said, “Yes, that’s exactly right.” And Tom has honored that scrupulously. So that transition actually took place over six months, a long time. Barry appointed me to Cornerstones, which was a system-wide strategic planning effort, so I was involved in California the CSU through Cornerstones stuff. I had a chance for also made a couple trips out here because we were looking for a house. We ended up renting a condominium in Coronado,
because the university didn’t have a university house at that time. So that transition took us through the spring. We then arrived out here, I think, sometime in late June. And I believe Tom’s last day was July 5, as will mine be.

SR: Had you been to San Diego prior to that?

SLW: Um-hm! We had! But in two contexts: One, when we were in Minnesota. When folks from Minnesota escape the winter, the Southwest is a natural destination. As you know, it’s often Arizona.

SR: I was going to say Phoenix!

SLW: Exactly. But it’s also San Diego and Southern California. So we knew it there [i.e. when we were in Minnesota] —not from vacationing, but from professional meetings. So we had been here a couple of times. In fact, Susan and I both remember being out on Shelter Island at the restaurant out there that sort of looks back down the harbor to the city. I’ve forgotten the name of it. Sitting there having dinner on what to Minnesotans seemed to be an incredibly balmy evening, probably in February or something like that, and looking down the bay at the city and how beautiful it was, and saying, “You know, we could imagine retiring here. This is a lovely place.” Now, we weren’t close to retiring yet, but we could sort of see that as a possibility, because it was such an attractive community.

Then when we were at Oswego I visited San Diego, and now as a campus president, you’re involved more in fundraising and working with the alumni and things like that, I would make occasional trips to the West Coast from Oswego, because we had a lot of alums out here. And those trips would typically be San Francisco, L.A., San Diego. So you’d be out here in California for a week, and
At that time, we had 120 alums from Oswego at that time in the San Diego area from Oswego. That’s because Oswego produced a lot of teachers, and in the sixties a lot of the teaching jobs were in California, where the population was growing. So for a lot of those reasons—and this was just as true in L.A. and San Francisco—so we had lots of alums out here. But there was one alum in particular whom I got to know, and who squired me around town a little bit, got to show me things. So I began to appreciate San Diego from that point of view. But frankly, for us the attraction of San Diego has never been San Diego—it’s been San Diego State. I always say to people that what’s great about San Diego is that we’re urban, we’re diverse, we’re high tech, we’re Pacific Rim, and we’re Latin America. There are no palm trees on that list. And how much time do you spend on the beach, really? But as an educator, this is a wonderful place to be an educator. So that’s what attracted us actually.

[END SESSION 1, BEGIN SESSION 2]

SR: Today is Thursday, June 9, 2011. This is Susan Resnik continuing to interview President Stephen Weber.

We had just begun to discuss your experience at San Diego State University. I read a quote referring to this time at San Diego State as an “era of excellence.” Would you tell me a little bit about Shared Vision? I’ve seen it described as a road map for the university’s future, and I believe that there are five components. Could you begin?
SLW: Yes. Shared Vision was really an important part of my coming to San Diego State. In fact, I should say not of my coming to San Diego State, but of beginning my work at San Diego State. I had a friend and colleague who was so confident in the men and women of San Diego State, that when I came he used to say, “Just give us our marching orders.” But I was very reluctant to give anybody marching orders, because, of course, I didn’t know San Diego State. I didn’t know San Diego, I didn’t know what we were capable of. So I preferred instead to have the campus give me my marching orders. And that’s really what we did with Shared Vision. We worked really hard, a lot of professionals pulled together to do it, and we had a year-long conversation on campus that came to be known as Shared Vision. And when I say a year-long conversation, I think they said over a thousand, maybe even up to two thousand people were involved. There were two multi-day retreats. There were a number of workshops and working groups, a lot of focus groups that were then televised across the campus. So the effort was to involve as many people as possible in thinking about the future of San Diego State University. And as it happened, this was a salutary event—and people still talk with me about it today, that it meant a lot to them. I think it was appropriate for San Diego State to sort of reassert its ownership of its own future. And if I had come in and simply pronounced what its future was, it would have been my vision; it wouldn’t have been their vision. And so it was just really good, and people worked hard; they came up with a wonderful sense of who we are, and what are the things that are important to us.
[And it’s out of that, [Shared Vision] that then the following fifteen years took place.

So the first goal was academic excellence—obviously the heart of any university.

The next goal—and I might not have them in the same order that you do—was with our student growth and development and having the whole experience for our students. *All mean, after all, what universities do is human growth and development, so we wanted a holistic environment in which our students could grow and prosper and learn.*

The third one was diversity and social justice—deeply important values for San Diego State University.

The fourth was the internationalization of the campus.

And the fifth was the wise use of resources.

*And those are roughly…. The order might be wrong. [Shared Vision] And we also said that we would report on these. As I said, it went through lots of vetting, lots of different things, until we came down to those were the five goals.*

*And then what I said was we would publish share a Shared Vision progress report every year. *And we did that, for, I think ten or twelve years. *And the campus has made extraordinary progress on every one of those goals. *And I think that’s because they were their goals.*

SR: Well, it was a participatory effort.

SLW: Absolutely.
SR: And I’m interested, because you said “we,” tell me about the colleagues you involved, how you involved them.

SLW: The head of our counseling and psychological services department was a man named Doug Van Sickle. And Doug was very good at involving people and understanding ideas of conversation. There were people in his offices who were interested in this project, so we did that [they led us]. But then, of course, we needed people to chair the committees, we needed people to arrange for the focus groups and the broadcasting of the focus groups. And so if I remember correctly, there were ultimately about twenty-five people who were on a sort of central steering committee that worked on different aspects, because it was alogistically ambitious project. Thanks to their really good thinking-through the project and… (You had to sort of say, “Okay, we’re going to be together for two days. How are we going to divide those two days? What are the discussion topics that are going to be out there? How are we going to report on those conversations? How are we going to give everybody else a chance to hear what this group said?” etc.) So lots of logistical things that had to be thought through.

SR: I can relate to that. I’ve been involved in helping do focus groups, and so I understand. That’s a mighty undertaking. Did you set out on paper, goals and objectives or anything like that?

SLW: No, other than we wanted a sustained and broad-based campus conversation. That was what we were looking for. In fact, I’ve often said afterwards that there’s nothing terribly surprising about the five goals that we came up with.
perfectly possible that we could have put a dozen people in a room for an afternoon and they would have come up with more or less the same goals. The point wasn’t the goals, it was the conversation.

SR: I understand—the process.

SLW: Exactly.

SR: That’s very interesting. So for academic excellence, what are some of the things that began to happen?

SLW: Well, a lot of things followed from that, but let me start with one of the things that’s actually quite similar to Shared Vision, because what Shared Vision amounted to was asking the campus what it thought. Well, one of the biggest things that happened on the front of academic excellence... (I need to make clear, this was an excellent university long before I got here. So it wasn’t like “let’s try excellence.” No, no, no.) But when I came, I was surprised to find that we were over-enrolled. And we were over-enrolled by about a thousand students. Now that’s a very unusual thing, because most universities around the country manage their own enrollments, and they basically manage their enrollments consistent with the resources they have to provide services for their students. But in the state of California, if a student met the minimum qualifications to come to San Diego State, which were established by the State of California (that were established by the State of California), if they met those qualifications, and applied to us, they could come. We couldn’t turn them away, they could come. But it didn’t follow that the State would fund them. So here we were with a thousand students who were on our campus, and no funds...
with which to support those thousand students. Had there been State funds, it would have cost $7 million to support those students. So what we were faced with was: on the one hand, as educators, we like to have students, we want students to come to San Diego State, to be able to study with us. But on the other hand, as educators, we don’t want to participate in an academic fraud in which we admit students but they who can’t get courses. So that was the question.

ABut as with Shared Vision, what my role was, was not to answer the question, but to ask the question. So I asked the Senate, which represents our university, to look into this matter, and to think about whether they wanted to seek permission to control our enrollments. And the tough choice there…. This also was a year-long conversation, held mostly by the Senate, but including large debates in Montezuma Hall and passionate speeches both for and against, and all that sort of thing. But the issue, as I said earlier, was: well, we want students, but we want students whom we can serve. So I put the question to the Senate. As I said, they worked through it with the campus community—students, faculty, staff—for the better part of the year, and then the Senate voted that it did want to control enrollments. It said it wanted to control enrollments, but not in such a way that it adversely affected the diversity of our campus. I thought that was good and sound advice. And so one of the tracks that has happened with regard to academic excellence is that we’ve transformed our student body. And that transformation was a product of that conversation. Because once we said we want to control our enrollments, and we got authority to do so, it meant that we were saying to some people they couldn’t come—
which is never a pleasant thing to do. But as soon as we said to some people they couldn’t come, then more people wanted to come, because (as Groucho Marx noted) this is what human beings are like. And that meant we had to say more people couldn’t come, which meant still more people wanted to come. So our applications rose to above 60,000 undergraduate applications. For this past year we’re at about 62,000. Three years ago when we looked at this, San Diego State was second in the whole country, in terms of undergraduate applications. Only UCLA had more than we had.

As you get more and more students applying for a limited number of spaces, not surprisingly the quality of the students goes up and up and up. So one aspect of the academic quality has been a better-prepared student body. Now, I hasten to stay that that better-prepared student body is also a more diverse student body than we had before, and has a greater proportion of low-income students than we had before. So it doesn’t fit the stereotypes that people might imagine. But just to follow that line through a little bit, then what happened is the retention of our students went way up, so students weren’t dropping out. And then our graduation rates, as they moved through, began to go way up. The students were taking more credit hours per semester than they had previously. They were more serious about their studies. We were requiring that they complete courses on time, and a whole bunch of things changed. But they changed as our student body got better and more serious about their work. So that now, speaking at the end of this process, San Diego State leads the nation in the improvement in graduation rates. There was an article in the Chronicle of Higher
Education about six months ago, on this matter. It said that in the last six years our graduation rate has gone up 17 percentage points, which leads the nation, \textit{and} (the number two and three institutions have only gone up 12 percentage points). Most of the nation, incidentally, is going backwards. Graduation rates are going down, not up. So this is really quite remarkable.

SR: That’s exciting!

SLW: What’s even more remarkable, though, is that they were looking only at the last six years. If you look at the last twelve years, our graduation rates are up 28 percentage points, and the graduation rate for our students of color is up 31.2 percentage points. This is interesting because—you’ve heard of the achievement gap….

SR: Yes.

SLW: We’re actually narrowing the achievement gap at San Diego State, and we’ve narrowed it to the point where it’s now almost statistically insignificant. But again, the achievement gap is growing around the rest of the country. So this is a big deal. \textit{So} that’s one example of academic excellence.

Another thing that happened, \textit{and} is happened more or less naturally, is universities are always seeking better and better faculty members. That’s just a natural process. The people who came before me were always seeking better and better faculty. What happens is that typically when a faculty member retires at age sixty-five or seventy, \textit{he} or \textit{she} represents the discipline fifty years ago. We bring in new people who represent the discipline now. Those retiring faculty are often at a point in their career where they’re probably not
starting new research projects; but those incoming faculty are just beginning their research. So you’re trading people with an older view of their profession, and typically less active researchers—and this is obviously a generalization—for a newer vision of the discipline and more active researchers. As we were able to hire more and more people, we’ve been able to bring wonderful new faculty to San Diego State, and that’s meant that our research productivity has gone up. So last year we did $151 million in grants and contracts, for which our faculty have to compete with other faculty around the country. And in the fifteen years I’ve been here, we’ve done over $1.5 billion in grants and contracts with these really, really good faculty members. These are the sorts of things that speak to the academic excellence of the institution, San Diego State, where now for the last four years we’ve been the number one small research university in the country for universities having fourteen or fewer Ph.D. programs.

SR: That’s marvelous. I know I was reading something about this as well: stronger SATs; increased, as you said, the GPAs; everything. It’s really wonderful. And honors programs swelled.

SLW: Well, it did, but again, as your student body changes, they look for different things from the university. So of course the university in turn then begins providing those services.

SR: Great. So, as you mentioned, of course along with the academic excellence, the goals intertwine with each other. As you said, the diversity was increasing as well. Tell me more about that and social justice.
SLW: Well, I’m a creature of the sixties myself, so I was really delighted when the campus said, “We care about diversity and social justice.” This is something I care a lot about. We’re San Diego is a diverse place, so in a certain sense, some diversity just comes with the territory. But we’ve SDSU has made some real gains in that diversity. For example, we used to have a model which we characterize—and this is probably not entirely fair—but we characterized it as a revolving door. A lot of our diversity were made up of students that who were not very well prepared, from not very good high schools, who they were destined to fail. So they came in, they spent a year here, and (in spite of our best efforts) many flunked out. It was not a good experience for them.

What we’ve tried to do is replace the revolving door with a Corridor to Graduation. So we’ve built lots and lots of programs—twenty-six, as a matter of fact—to help improve our graduation rates, and to build a culture of success for all students. We’ve also reached out beyond the campus in a number of ways. We have a Compact for Success with the Sweetwater Unified School District, which is in the South Bay of San Diego. It’s the oldest largest and most diverse secondary school district in the state of California—“secondary” meaning grades seven through twelve. And we have basically tripled the college-going rate of the students down there, and greatly improved their college preparation.

So some of this moves speaks to the notion of social justice; what we move out into the community and give people the opportunities that perhaps had been previously missing for them. And then if they come to San Diego State, great.
But if they’re prepared and they want to end up at UCLA, well good for them. So we do a lot of things of that sort.

We also have a program in City Heights called the City Heights Collaborative. City Heights is the poorest community in San Diego. It’s only about two miles away from our campus. We actually run three public schools in City Heights: an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. Among those three, there are about 5,000 students in those schools. Well, that’s another example of social justice and outreach into the community, a disadvantaged community in the case of City Heights, a community that is largely immigrant based, literally from all over the world.

Now, I want to make clear, in many of these things, this is not a matter of charity for us, or noblesse oblige. This makes us a better university. It gives us wonderful opportunities in terms of how we prepare teachers, prepare them for the realities of today’s inner-city schools. It gives us research opportunities, it gives up partnerships with issues of public health and community organizing, a whole range of things. So it’s a wonderful synergy that taps something deeply resonant in San Diego State: this concept of social justice. It’s one of the things that our campus cared about long before I got here, and they cared about, have continued to pursue. Going for.

SR: Very exciting. And as you mentioned, I can just imagine all the different players who are involved with the schools. Did you have special ways of reaching out to the teachers?
SLW: **All those things.** Well, for example, we first of all, these schools [in City Heights] are like charter schools but they’re technically called “pilot schools”.

We were not interested in a hostile takeover, so we said we would only do this with a vote of the teachers. **But one of the things we were able to do is,**

Typically inner-city schools have some of the least well-credentialed teachers, the youngest teachers, teachers tend to flee those schools when they have opportunities to go to suburban schools. **Well, we basically reversed that.** And we’ve worked with those teachers to help them get their master’s degrees and be able to do that on site. I think at one point we had something like eighteen different departments on campus that were involved in this project in different various ways, because we needed everybody’s help.

SR: That’s terrific. That’s really just great. Well, proceeding along with the shared goals, Global University Program.

SLW: **Well, that’s another wonderful story.** It was not long after Shared Vision that I needed to hire a new provost as our chief academic officer. **And this is where that kind of** guidance from Shared Vision turned out to be very, very helpful, because I’m looking for the key person for the academic division of our the university. **And this is a person who’s responsible for about 75% of the budgets in the university, so it’s a big, big job.** But now I know what the campus cares about, so I’m able to go out and look for a person that cares about social justice and diversity, that cares about academic excellence, and that cares about internationalization—to go back to your question. So I hired a woman named Nancy Marlin; and she is passionate about internationalization of
the campus. I’ll give you some sense of that. This last year we sent
approximately 1,800 students abroad. When Nancy came, I think we sent were
sending about 60 students abroad. So International studies at SDSU is now a
completely different world, completely different world. She has worked
with a number of departments that now require an international experience as a
part of the student’s major. She’s worked with the students to vote a fee to help
provide financial support for students who are studying abroad. Really strong
environment of internationalization. Also, we’ve greatly increased the number of
international students studying here.

SR: I was wondering about that.

SLW: Oh yeah. Both of those things. Our students, at the same time, San Diego is a
very international place. So here we are on the Rim of the Pacific and the
threshold of Latin America. So our students tend to get it. And students who
aren’t from San Diego but come here, one of the reasons they come here is
because we’re an international…. So they also care about this. So one of the
things that we’ve seen is the enrollment in our language classes has gone way
up. The enrollments in what we call area studies have also gone way up. These
are international classes — people are interested in learning about Southeast Asia
or Latin America, or whatever. So the transformation with regard to
internationalization has been really just extraordinary, and mostly of Nancy’s
doing. In terms of sending students abroad, we’re now second among all the
universities in the state of California in sending students abroad, and in the top
twenty nationwide in sending students abroad. And as I said, we have a large
group, I think about 1,600 international students on campus every year. We also have the largest English-as-a-second-language program of any university in the United States. And we have a special program called LARC, which is a federally funded Language Acquisition Resource Center. *Wonderful,* wonderful program. This program does a lot of very sophisticated languages, works with languages for the Navy Seals, for example; does work with the Marines—in this current environment, a lot of Middle Eastern languages that are offered.

SR: That’s fascinating. You just mentioned Marines, and that struck something else that I had noticed. There’s something that I believe has happened since you were here too, more of a presence of veterans or military. Talk about that a little bit.

SLW: *Well, yes,* I’m really proud of that. Let me start by saying one of the things that’s been very good, and particularly with our current chief diversity officer, a man named Aaron Bruce, is a broad definition of diversity. At some institutions, diversity is equated with the ethnic background of whoever the ethnic diversity officer happens to be. *Well,* not so with Aaron. He’s got a broad sense of what diversity means. *And so* it includes the LGBT community, and it includes people with disabilities, and it includes immigrants, and some of the issues low-income families face. But it also includes veterans. *So* one of the things that has served San Diego State very well is that we’re in San Diego, and we try to reflect San Diego in not all, but much that we do.

Here’s a case where San Diego is literally the largest military complex in the world. Lots and lots of military muster-out here. This represents a huge amount of human talent, which we would like to keep in California and in San
Diego. So San Diego State has now kind of stepped up. We think we have more veterans on campus than any university in the country. This past year it was 1,050 veterans enrolled; plus we have lots of active-duty military; plus lots of dependents -- so a wide military community here [at SDSU]. TBut the point about this is we really reached out to accomplish this. One of the keys—which we weren’t responsible for—was that the veterans began to come together and organize themselves into a Student Veterans Association organization. A young man named Nathaniel Donnelly, led that effort—a former Marine. TAnd this was very helpful, because the nature of a university presidency is you talk to lots of people who care about lots of different things, and who claim to be the voice of lots of those different things. But you often have no way of knowing whether they speak for other people or not.

SR: Always an issue, yeah.

SLW: So I could have had individual veterans tell me “we care about this,” or “we care about that.” TAnd it would have been very hard to say, “Well, I’ve consulted the veteran community, and they think this.” But with a student organization, I could begin to do that, so I wasn’t just hand picking the people from whom I wanted to get whatever advice I wanted. WBut we now had a group with which we could work. TAnd they have wonderful leadership, so we began to work with them to develop a veterans’ center, because we learned from them, that one of the things they most missed about the military was the camaraderie. TSo they needed a place to hang out together. I wouldn’t have thought of that, I wouldn’t have understood that. But once I understood it, we could do that. Then
they told me, “We would really like to have some dedicated housing for veterans.” That’s good, we can do that too. So we did that. In the process, as the veterans helped tell us their needs, and we tried to respond to those needs, we became a national leader in providing for this new generation of emerging veterans, which meant, of course, that we again had a leadership opportunity, which is what makes it fun to do this. Our university stature grew—that’s always nice—so we have more and more opportunities to do things related to veterans.

There is, incidentally—and this happened just as I was coming to San Diego State—we have a war memorial on this campus. There are only two war memorials on university campuses west of the Mississippi, in the whole country. We happen to have one. We have a very large and active ROTC program here. So a lot of things with regard to the veterans.

But then I should add, as people began to understand the needs of veterans, they were interested in donating to support them. Here again, this becomes a self-reinforcing process. Of now we have people who... And this is often the case. It’s not that they want to give money to support San Diego State; they want to give money to support something, e.g. veterans, and we’re the vehicle through which they can do that. A number of the people who have supported our veterans’ program, are very grateful to San Diego State for what they’ve done for veterans. But their real point is, “Now you’ve given me a way in which I can support those veterans too.”
SR: Very interesting. Tell me, are there more and more women in this veterans’ group?

SLW: Absolutely. In fact, that’s one of the things that is different from the Vietnam era. This is an all-volunteer force. They have all basically got to have a high school diploma to get into the military in the first place. The military is now far more integrated, both racially and in terms of gender, than it was previously. So one of the things that’s nice about the military, the military is more integrated racially than most of our society. But its racial diversity pretty much reflects San Diego’s. I don’t mean with particular groups, but in terms of the proportion of people that are of color. So this is also a very comfortable place for people who value the military because it’s one of the more racially enlightened organizations in the world, San Diego State is also a very comfortable place for them to come to. So there’s just good synergies between the two. And I should add, the defense industry is a major part of the San Diego economy. One of the challenges… We have a special program called Troops to Engineers. What’s happened—I’m generalizing—but what’s happened with regard to graduate education in the sciences and in engineering across the country is that more and more of our graduate degrees are being earned by foreign students. And many of those foreign students, of course, are going back to their own countries. Of the ones who stay here and decide that they’re going to pursue a career in engineering or something like that, as foreign-born nationals, they often can’t get security clearances to work in our defense industry. But our veterans can. So as we’re able to get veterans in these fields, they are really sought out by local
industry, because they need the engineers, but they particularly need engineers who can get security clearances to do sensitive work. So it just works very well for everybody.

SR: That’s exciting. Well, of course that also leads into another of your goals, which is resources development.

SLW: (laughs) University presidents spend a lot of their time dealing with resources. That means a lot of different things. We’ve tried to be very careful with the precious dollars that we get. One way to see that—I want to go back to the graduation rates—we’ve looked at that changed graduation rate and we’ve said, “When we had our old graduation rate, to produce a hundred graduates cost the state of California $11.4 million.‖ Now what that means is, it takes $11.4 million for one hundred students to get to the baccalaureate degree. Well, one of the reasons it costs so much is because—go back to that revolving door—a whole bunch of those students never got to their sophomore year. A whole bunch of folks who you supported for two years never got to their junior year. Now it costs $6.6 million to produce a hundred baccalaureate degrees. Well, there’s a good use, a wise use, of resources.

Another basic thing is that we’ve done about $700 million in capital construction, major capital projects, since I’ve been here. Only 23% of that has been paid for by the citizens of California. Again, wise use of resources, doing things with other funding sources, et cetera.

And then maybe the best example of this is that we’ve really changed our environment with regard to philanthropy. Public education in California is
late to philanthropy. It used to be against the law, basically, to raise money in California for public universities. So we’ve had to catch up with this process. When I came, we were raising about $18 million a year. This year we’ll raise over $70 million. So there’s a big difference. The last three years, which have been the toughest three years for our economy since the Depression, have been our best three fund-raising years ever. So we’ve changed the culture and the climate. We’ve raised about $700 million in philanthropy. And to give you a sense of that, that’s... And we’ve done that in the last fifteen years. That’s three times what we raised in the prior ninety-nine years. So that’s a big change, all of which is... There’s lots of things that go into this. None of these things happen alone.

One of the things I think is important is that San Diego State is not an arrogant university. We will talk with anyone, and we will listen to their concerns. And out of those conversations have come some wonderful new things that we never thought about: a conversation with the biotech industry that led to a program in regulatory affairs, because they were saying they couldn’t get their intellectual product to market because they lacked regulatory affairs professionals to guide that process. So we developed the second master’s degree in regulatory affairs in the United States. Wasn’t my idea—I didn’t even know there was such a thing as regulatory affairs. It was the idea of the industry.

Same thing with construction and engineering management. The construction industry wanted us to help develop that engineering management
kind of person who could take complex construction sites and understand both the business and the engineering involved of them.

... Maybe the best example—well, another another example first is our hospitals: they came to us and said, “We’ve got a shortage of nurses.” We developed a program with them called Nurses Now that doubled the production of nurses.

... But the best example I think is the hospitality industry. It’s the third-largest industry in San Diego, they came to us and said, “We need a school of hospitality.” So we developed a school of hospitality.

... Now, those are all good synergistic conversations. But AI think as we proved ourselves willing to listen, and then willing to try to provide these services, the community, in turn, was willing to support us. It is a virtuous circle: in the sense that San Diego State is good at listening, good at trying to respond to the needs of San Diego; and San Diego has been increasingly good about then supporting us in that work.

SR: That’s very interesting. Tell me more about cultivating philanthropists and how that has come about.

SLW: Well, it’s a major part of my job and it’s also... There are lots of jobs in which there are other people in the university that know more than I do and are better prepared to accomplish. But often when you’re talking about major gifts, at some point someone has to say, “This is important to the university.” If some one’s saying, “I’d like to give $12 million to San Diego State University because I believe in this,” they need the president of the university...
saying, “Yes, that’s important to us, yes, we will be sure that the money is spent as you intend.” So the university president is kind of the person who gets involved with that. One of the things I like to say, we have a vice-president for advancement named Mary Ruth Carleton, and she’s very, very good. For a vice-president of advancement, the university president is a tool, because she needs that university president to cultivate relations, to ask people for their support, to do all these things. I like to say that for the other vice-presidents, the university president is an obstacle. But for this one, for the advancement person, the university president is a tool.

The other thing is, for the donors, as I said earlier, the university is the tool. You’ve got for example, the donors who care about veterans. We’re the vehicle to do that. Donors who care about increasing the production of nurses. We’re the vehicle to do that, et cetera, et cetera. So in this regard, a large part of the job is to develop those relationships, and that’s just the value added that a university president can bring to the mix, that others often aren’t in a position to add.

I would say there’s a part of that, though, that people sometimes don’t understand. A university president is the CEO of the organization. There are far better and more skillful administrators than I, are out there running the university, so I’m not sitting there with a green visor, balancing the budget, hiring everybody, and doing all that. There are other people who are better at those jobs than I am.
A major part of the university president’s job is storytelling. That’s what the job is. With regard to philanthropy, part of it is being able to understand the story, and then being able to tell it. That means understanding San Diego State’s history, and understanding its successes and failures and its players through time. If you’re in a position to be involved in the community, and if you’ve been very graciously allowed to be involved in lots of different community organizations, so you hear their concerns. Then, on the other hand, you understand the talents and the capabilities of the university. You’re often in a position to be a matchmaker. It’s not that the matchmaking always works—sometimes it doesn’t. But as I said, we’re not arrogant. I’ll say—it happens quite frequently—‘‘I’ll get some people in a room, you bring me your people, I’ll bring some of ours, and we’ll sit together for an afternoon. You tell us what you need, and we’ll make sure we understand this.’’ Now, it could be at the end of this discussion we don’t have anybody who is interested in working on that issue; or we don’t have anybody who can actually offer anything to them. But then we’ll know that. If we do have an interest, we’ll know that, and we can pursue it. So there’s a lot of what the university president does, is he or she hears community concerns. A lot of my colleagues here, who are doing their jobs seventy hours a week, they’re not able to be out there to hear those concerns. So you’re a matchmaker.

SR: That’s a very interesting perspective, and well said.

SLW: One more thought on that storyteller. At this moment, we’re in the midst of a transition to a new university president. Dr. Elliot Hirshman has been chosen as
my successor. Earlier this morning I was with Elliot. I spent much of yesterday with him. We’re doing sort of intensive briefings, putting him together with the vice-presidents, doing all this sort of stuff, so he begins to have a context before he assumes his responsibilities in July. Now we’ve known this day was coming, actually, for four years, but particularly in the last year a lot of us at San Diego State have been engaged in this process, wondering who would emerge as my successor. What I’ve been saying to people during that timespan is that they often don’t understand what the president actually does. In fact, if a president does his or her work well, it just frees them to do their work, so they don’t have to know. But what I’ve been saying to them is that in fact, the major job if a university president is the job of storyteller. And so the risk to the university as you change presidents is not that now the finances are not going to be handled, or the budgets aren’t going to be balanced. No! Of course not! Because other people do that anyway. And it’s not that all of a sudden great faculty won’t be hired or good students won’t be admitted. No! The university president doesn’t really do any of that. But the danger is that you lose your storyteller. That’s the danger. You’re exposed for a while without a storyteller. So what I’ve been saying for the last year to people at San Diego State is, “Take this occasion to actually think about the story. Internalize it for yourself, because there’s no one story. So you figure out what you think the story is, and then share it with Elliot, and Elliot will absorb all those stories, and he’s going to create his own interpretation of those stories, and then you’ll empower him to
the job of the president, and that is to be able to tell the story. It’s a very good and healthy process, and it’s been a good experience for the whole campus.

SR: That’s marvelous.

SLW: Do you want to talk about the state of California?

SR: If you do.

SLW: Sure. I need to start by saying that the state of California is an absolutely extraordinary place. I came here from New York. The greatness of New York a hundred years ago was that it was a node through which the United States interacted with Europe. And it was a wonderful relationship there. Well, the fact is, now the world is being invented around the Pacific, and not the Atlantic. And California is the emerging node through which the United States is relating itself to the Pacific. California at one point was, I think, the seventh-largest economy in the world. It attracts all sorts of invention and new ideas, the Silicon Valleys—in our San Diego’s case, the wireless industry lives here, the biotech industry…. California is about the future. As an Easterner, I’m sad to say the East is about the past. It’s a great past, it’s a wonderful past, but by and large, the future’s going to be invented in the West. There’s an interesting fact about that, that goes back to a little bit, what I was saying earlier. Three years ago, the number ten university in the country for undergraduate applications was Arizona State. The top nine in the country were all in the state of California. Now think of that. We’re talking about a world in which prosperity is going to be equated to brain power, and California had the top nine applications in the country. Of the top nine, eight are in Southern California. And of the top
five, two are in San Diego. San Diego State was number two, UCSD was number five. This is the good news of California. This is the wonderful news of California.

The other thing about California is the diversity of California, which leads the diversity of our country. That is, as the country becomes increasingly diverse, California is the leading example of that diversity. And it’s California’s figuring out how to be a diverse society in ways that the rest of the country will benefit from and from which others will learn. Just as California is leading on issues of environmental quality. California sort of figures it out, the rest of the country mirrors it. So it’s good to be a part of a leader in that sense.

When you look back at California in the sixties, it was an extraordinary place in terms of education. Its K-12 schools were always in the top five—schools K through 12—among the states in the country. Now, California is schools are always among the bottom five.

SR: How did that happen?

SLW: California gave up on funding itself. A lot of that was Prop. 13. There’s a wonderful book called Paradise Now. It came out not long after I came to California, by an author named Peter Schrag [phonetic], who’s with the Sacramento Bee. Wonderful education reporter. I was really interested in this book, because I was eager to get as much information as I could about California. Paradise Lost, of course, is referencing Milton’s title, but the paradise that has been lost is California, that Schrag’s talking about is California. He traces much of that to Prop. 13. He also traces much of it to the super-majorities—these
are my words, not his—which he sees as a desperately cynical measure to preserve white hegemony against our the changing demographics. And a basically successful ploy that postponed the transfer of power for one, maybe two generations. Serious stuff.

What you’ve got now is a state that can’t afford to invest in its own citizens; that is more interested in its prisons than in its universities. I like to say, as a philosopher, when I was studying philosophy, there was a seminal book called *Five Stages of Greek Religion* by Gilbert Murray. Wonderful book. And it’s asking, saying, how on earth did we lose this wonderful system of Greek religion to these upstart Christians? What happened there? How on earth did a couple of folks in Jerusalem walk over Athens and ancient Greece? It just doesn’t make any sense. Well, his answer is that it was a “failure of nerve”. Very interesting. And so what he’s really saying is, that whole Greek society, concept and culture lost its nerve. Interesting [hypothesis]. So I keep saying to myself, “Okay, what is it?” How did California blow this opportunity?”

And my answer is, it’s not a failure of nerve, it’s a triumph of selfishness. That’s exactly what Prop. 13 is, is a triumph of selfishness. But it’s also what we’ve done in a society that has spent huge amounts of money on its own consumer satisfaction, and denied those resources to the next generation, and to its schools, et cetera. So I think California has, of all the parts of the United States, the best opportunity to have a future, but at the moment at least, it is more interested in indulging its creature comforts than sacrificing for that future.
One of the most basic animal prerogatives is the idea that you sacrifice yourself for the next generation. There’s very little evidence that we’re doing that. There’s little evidence we’re even capable of that. But the good news is there are other people who are. They’re in China; they’re in India. And it’s not a human tragedy, because the human process will go on. It’s just that we’ve pretty much given up on our desire to lead.

SR: Do you see yourself, in a way, as a politician, as well as a storyteller?

SLW: Absolutely. There’s no way around the fact that a university president isn’t going to be able to serve his or her university well and be tone deaf. So you have to pay attention to these issues. There’s a wonderful story that I won’t have exactly right, but you remember that Woodrow Wilson had been the president of Princeton. When people said, “What’s a university president doing running the free world?,” he said, “I learned politics at Princeton.” That’s right, universities are highly political organizations. There’s a cliché that isn’t true, (i.e. I don’t agree with it), but it’s a telling line, nonetheless, and that is that in universities the political fights are so fierce because the stakes are so small. Now that’s not true, but the concept is they are fierce. These are people who care deeply about their work, they’re competing for scarce resources—almost the definition of a political environment. But then in a public university, you’re of course funded by the citizens of California, so you are literally working with your representatives and with legislators to deal with those things. So a major part of the challenge of a university president is to engage in the political environment in a way that is not—well, there are some exceptions—but I’ve always thought in a
way that is not partisan, but is capable of working with changing constituencies and changing alliances on both sides of the aisle, to advance the interests of the organization.

And I should add another thing. Since the legislature, and to some degree the Congress, controls part of your resources, it means you’re spending time in Sacramento, you’re spending time in Washington, you know all these people, you work with them regularly, you’re trying to solicit their help for various different projects. On the other hand, they’re trying to solicit your help for projects of theirs. So it’s a highly political environment. And I don’t mean anything negative by that. It bothers me that politics have begun to have a negative connotation. This is a great example of the people’s business, and folks are attending to that. And I should say that almost, not completely, but almost without exception the public servants with whom I’ve worked in the City of San Diego, and the State of California, and across the United States, have been very good, decent people, trying to accomplish good things for the people they serve. There are jerks, but they’re more or less the normal distribution of jerks that you find in any other human society.

SR: That’s very interesting. Would you talk a bit about over the years that you’ve been here, the change and the opportunities to use new kinds of media as you are doing what you do.

SLW: First of all, that’s a very perceptive question, because effective use of media is absolutely critical, and there are so many ways in which we could talk about that. But remember, universities are environments in which the faculty
members are inventing those new communication technologies. And the students are early adopters of those new communication technologies. So you’ve got to not only keep up, but you’ve got to be ahead of the game. And it evolves all the time.

I would also say, that if you go back to my earlier statement that the university president is a storyteller, you’ve got to tell that story now on multiple platforms. There was a time when the only thing “university president as storyteller”, the only thing that really meant was that maybe the university president would retire and go write a history of the campus. Well now, no. So let me give you, first of all, an example of that. And then I’ll want to come back to the broader question.

When I was in school, to register for a course meant standing in line. You’d work your way to the [head] of the line only to find out that the course was now full and you had to go stand in another line. Then there was a period where you still had to stand in the line, but you now did it with computer cards. They’d give you a computer punch-card for the course then, and you’d register that way. Well, then the next big advance was that you could register by phone. Now I won’t know the dates of this exactly, but I’m guessing in the eighties we began registering students by phone. Wonderful, wonderful advance. So you could touch tone in and you could say this is Craig. Then we began registering on line. So before, when we were registering by phone, but what if you were in Tuscany? Well, tough luck. But now, registering on line, it doesn’t matter. You can do it you’re anywhere in the world, now you can do it. Now the latest
thing in course registration is through the web portal. And what that means now is our students…. When you registered by phone, for example, by registering what you did is you said was indicate that you’d like to have a particular course; but they had to get back to you then and find out to let you know whether you got the course. Now you have your own dedicated web portal. You log on; you, Susan, are the only person that can have this portal. It shows you only the courses that are open, so you don’t have to shop through them. It shows you only the courses you’re eligible for, so it’s not going to show you the upper division physics courses that you couldn’t register for. When you touch the screen, you are enrolled in the course. It’s instantaneous. A So completely different world—absolutely completely different world. Now that’s just with regard to registration for courses. The same thing has happened....

Now let’s start, in the more traditional sense of storytelling. It used to be that universities would have a university publication of some sort, a magazine. Well, actually I should start, the old thing used to be a university catalog. Remember those big, thick catalogs?

SR: Sure.

SLW: We don’t have university catalogs. They’re all on line, you can get all this information. But back to the magazines; now your magazines are primarily electronic. More and more of them aren’t printed at all, or they’re printed in very limited editions. They’re electronic. And, of course, there are all sorts of web publications; Face Book, Twitter, social media. We have a dedicated professional in University Relations who’s a social media specialist. It’s a
wonderful vehicle for communicating with people. So communications have changed a lot.

And I should add in the case of San Diego State, we also have a wonderful research communications tool in KPBS, which is our public broadcasting station. KPBS is one of the top ten stations in the country, both on radio and on television, and part of where KPBS is now leading a national trend towards multi-platform broadcasting. You’ll see they’re driving stories not only by broadcasts, but through their website and other things, being able to do follow-up stories, expanded stories on the web. They’ve got the information, but previously you didn’t have a way to share it.

So the world of communications is evolving very, very fast, and because you have such a sophisticated audience, they just demand that you be up to date on those things. There’s no end in sight. Communications are going to get faster and faster.

SR: But it’s also such a marvelous opportunity for you, as the president, to get across messages to such a wide range of audiences.

SLW: Yes, that’s true. Normally that’s exactly what it is. You remember the old cliché that you should never start an argument with somebody who buys ink by the barrel? Well, that used to be true. At the end of the day, it was hard to pick a fight with a newspaper, because they were going to have the last word. Even when they were completely wrong and misinformed, you were dependent upon them to make the correction, which they would make in a little box on Page 4. Well now, if it’s serious, I can reach out to 200,000 people with...
the truth of the story. That changes the whole relationship. That means now—and it’s not as if the newspaper doesn’t understand that—So it has made that relationship a more honest relationship in which the newspaper tends to be far more eager to get its facts right, because they don’t want us correcting them. You end up with a situation—and you’ll see this often now with a story that has a serious factual error in it. We will notify the newspaper right away, and they will change their web posting of the story immediately. Well, that wasn’t possible ten years ago.

SR: Absolutely.

SLW: One of the reasons they’re so responsive is not only because they would rather get the story correct, as they would, but they also know if they don’t set the record straight, we will, and they’d rather then not be publicly on the wrong side of the facts.

SR: Yeah. Speaking of stories, will you share a story with us….

SLW: When we were talking about Shared Vision, as I came to San Diego State, the Shared Vision process began in the fall. Actually, we began talking about it in the fall, and the process began the following spring, because it took a lot of planning, as I said before. But I came in early July. My first day was July 5. The campus was extraordinarily open and welcoming and constructive in thinking both wanting us to succeed, and trying to help us figure out how to succeed.

But one of the most extraordinary things in the history of the university then happened soon afterwards. And that is three of our faculty members were murdered on campus by a graduate student who was taking his oral examination.
for his master’s degree—a student in engineering. This was, as you could imagine, an absolutely horrid, horrid moment. I was so new that my colleagues were concerned that I would think this was business as usual. And of course so they hastened to assure me that this had never happened before, and of course it’s never happened since. But the victims were three young faculty members in the College of Engineering at the outset of very promising careers. A master’s student, who was obviously distraught, secreted a gun in the conference room. There were actually students in the room, as well as observers. The shooter literally murdered the three faculty members. An extraordinarily heroic police officer, one of our public safety officers, ended up facing this man in a corridor, with a loaded gun, having just killed three people, and was able to get him to drop that gun and capture him.

This was an absolutely traumatic moment, not only for those families and those colleagues, but also for our whole university. It also happened on the last day of the Republican Convention, which happened to be in town. That meant that the national press were all in San Diego. They were all immediately on campus. As a new university president, you don’t get to deal with the situations—you just have to deal with the situations you’re given; you don’t get to choose them.

So here’s a terrible, terrible situation, but one of the things that came out of this was remarkably positive—I know this is a stereotype—but engineers tend to be very much concentrated on their work, and not terribly engaged within the rest of the campus. It is a stereotype, but there is some truth to
that. So the engineers were surprised that the whole campus was distraught by this. Their image of their role, and their relationship to San Diego State was not such that everyone else would be aggrieved. So there was a very interesting lesson for the whole campus in this, about how unified we actually aware, that emerged from this tragedy. And it was an important lesson. It’s not a lesson we sought or wanted, but the truth is everybody kind of stepped back and said, “Oh my, we care about those three engineers and their families and their children, and they probably care about the rest of us too.” It was a very seminal moment in the history of our university, that to this day, as I’m leaving, when people talk about things in the last fifteen years that they want to recognize as having shared together, that’s one of the ones that comes up.

SR: And that was at the very beginning. My goodness.

SLW: Yeah, I think maybe six weeks, something like that.

SR: Do you recall having been interviewed at that time by the press?

SLW: Oh sure. Sure. All that sort of thing. But what I recall most is the time of with the widows and their little kids on their living room rugs, of and being in one of the houses as the police brought back the personal effects of the husband. Those are just terrible experiences. Going to memorial services. That the rest of the campus felt towards these young families. In that sense, it was obviously an extraordinary moment, but it was a very moving one.

SR: Yeah. As you are now where you are, and we’re reflecting back, are there any other major events or moments that jump out at you?
SLW: (chuckles) Yeah, there are. There are lots of events that come out that call for the university to speak to…. And this is a good example, if I had been a faculty member in the Philosophy Department, I’d like to believe that I would have been shocked by this tragedy, that I would have cared about it, that I might have written a note to the widows. But if you’re the president of the university, you’ve actually got to say something about it. That’s really part of the difference. You now have to find the voice of the university, and you can’t presume that your own views are the voice of the university, so you’ve got to look for a voice that resonates with the people whose feelings you’re articulating. That’s always a delicate process.

Another example of that, that happened only a couple of years ago, is we had a huge drug bust on campus. We had worked very closely with, and cooperated with the FBI and things like that. But there again, as the university president, you have to stand in front of the cameras and articulate the university’s values and make decisions about how to tell what’s going to happen to these young people, and what the consequences are for the university, and deal with people whose understanding of San Diego State is tangential. So all of a sudden there’s a danger that they’re going to equate the university with this one event—whether the one event is the murder of the engineers, or the drug bust, or fill in any number of other things. And a large part of my job is to find a way to return to what the university actually is, and put this event in some context against what the university actually is, and do it in a way that both responds to the public appetite to understand it, which is fair enough and
legitimate, and to the university’s desire that you speak the truth in a way that actually they can actually recognize it as the truth.

SR: At this juncture, tell me about, as you’re embarking on a new adventure, retirement, talk to me a little about what you’re thinking about.

SLW: Well, let me start by what I used to think about. When I was a young man, I assumed I would retire at age sixty-five. And pretty much everybody in our society did assume that. So it was not as if there was any genuine thought behind it—it was just what everybody assumed. As I approached age sixty-five, I was healthy, I was having a good time, and my colleagues said, “Really, you ought to stay, you shouldn’t retire.” And Susan and I discussed that, and it brought us to kind of changing our mind about retirement, and saying, “Yeah, we ought to stay.” When university presidents retire, one of the things that they often do is that they go off to be interim presidents at other universities. And I’m saying said to myself, “Well, why would I want to be an interim president at a university I don’t care about, when I can be the president of a university I do care about?” So we thought about this for a while, and we said, “Yes, we’d like to stay a little bit longer.”

But then the next thought I had was, “But Well, I don’t want people wondering, ‘When is he gonna leave?!’” So we said, “Let’s agree to do four more years, and I will announce it to the university now, so everybody’s clear about it.” So four years ago I said, “I’ll stay until 2011.” Now, that’s contrary to all the management gobbledygook about being a lame duck and things like that. It turned out to be a very good thing to do. It served the university well,
because it was enabled a very orderly transition, everybody knew what was out there, they knew what was coming. So it turned out, I think, to serve us all very well.

When I now look at the actual retirement, and as you and I speak, my last day in the office will be in a week. My last official day will be July 5, but I’ll take some vacation between my last day in the office and July 5. So I’ll soon be leaving, and the first thing I would say is it is a new adventure, and I’m ready for a new adventure. And I use that word [adventure], and it’s the right word. We have been here for fifteen years, and I did a university presidency before this one, so I’ve been a university president for twenty-three years. That’s a long time in the scheme of things. So I’m ready to do something else. But people often say, “What are your plans for retirement?” It is something to talk about all this. And I’ve come to say, “You know, you asked the question the right way, because they’re only plans—and I’ve never retired before, so I don’t really know.” That’s what makes it an adventure!

So what I think is that—well, I know that we’re going to move to Maine, where we have a home that we built about thirty years ago. And that home has served as home base for us for a long time. We built it shortly after we left the University of Maine. We were living in Connecticut then. But as we moved around the country to different jobs, that’s actually been the home base. And even before we had that home, Maine was where our first young professional friendships were formed; it’s where our kids were born. It is, as I said, a place that we return to every summer. So that’s part of what we see in our retirement.
I like to do woodworking, so I’m going to be doing woodworking. I’m going to be writing. Susan and I enjoy gardening. We’ll be doing gardening. I like to kayak, and we’re right there where I’ll be kayaking. So we’ll do the things in our retirement that most people imagine doing in their retirement.

Our expectation is that we will leave Maine around Thanksgiving time every year and we’ll travel to a warmer place. This year we’re going to Dunedin on the south island of New Zealand, basically for December and January. And then we’ll come back to San Diego for February and March. We’ve rented a condo in Solana Beach. And then we’ll go back to Maine in the spring to get the gardens going and do things like that.

So that’s what we imagine for our retirement. I’ve got a couple boards that I’m going to serve on, that I just care about what they do. And I’ll continue to be involved in things like that. But as I say to people, I’m sixty-nine years old, and it’s a good time for somebody else to come in and start asking new questions at San Diego State.

SR: Okay. Well, thank you so much for sharing this oral history with me, and it will be with a lot of other people fortunately, because of the new communications that we have on line. Clearly you are not only a storyteller, but you’re a very active listener, and a leader, and it’s just been a pleasure for me to conduct this interview. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]