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Steve McLane

Merrett Helfferich

Brian Rogers, interviewer

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Brian Rogers said there has been some concern in the legislature about organized research at the University of Alaska. There have been some charges researchers are overpaid and nonproductive and organized research is not well coordinated with the educational programs at the University of Alaska. There have been actions in the legislature to eliminate funding for two of the research institutes at the university.

Rogers asked Steve McLane and Merrett Helfferich about their positions at the university. McLane said he had an instructional appointment in the Division of Life Sciences Department of Biological Sciences and a research position in the Institute of Arctic Biology. For the last four years he has been chairman for instructional program for Biological Sciences. He is involved with research on animal populations of arctic and sub-arctic Alaska during the summer. He talked about his funding and how it changes from year to year depending on his success from gaining funding for his research activities. Helfferich said the Technical Services Division at the Geophysical Institute provides support to the researchers and graduate students. It is a complex support activity because much of the research activity which is done requires new techniques and a lot of field work.

Rogers said there have been allegations only Fairbanks benefits from the research. Helfferich said research projects are conducted throughout Alaska and even other countries. There are stations in Fort Yukon, Barrow, and many other localities. He said their funding is approximately 80 percent from sources other than the state of Alaska. He talked about their funding sources. The state money frequently pays for projects which are of specific interest to the state such as studies in seismology. Rogers said the legislature wonders what kind of tangible benefits there are to some of the research. Helfferich talked about the benefits of research. In seismology the long-term research has led to changes in building code requirements, construction techniques and a long-term understanding of the forces at work in the Earth. It also ties in with tsunamis and how to build along shore lines and how to build oil drilling rigs taking in seismic activity considerations. Most research is a long-term investment.

Rogers said one of the charges by the legislature is there is not enough coordination between the research component and the academic component at the university and research draws away from state funding for educational programs. McLane said historically the situation Rogers described might well have been true. The research arm of the university was independent from the instructional arm however in the past five or six years research and instruction have been drawn closer together. Now the research faculty are by and large involved in teaching. Instructional faculty are increasingly involved in research. He used physics as an example. With more faculty the students are exposed to more ideas. He

thinks they have very strong instructional programs as a direct consequence of research involvement at the university.

Rogers asked if the university attracted better faculty because it is a research and academic institute McLane said absolutely. There are many reasons for top scientists coming to Alaska because of the research opportunities.

Rogers said there is the question of tenure for faculty who are not on state funding. McLane said he doesn't see a solution by taking away tenure from productive members of the academic community. He thinks the solution is to produce a single category of faculty members involved in instruction and research. Helfferich said faculty need the protection of tenure to continue in their job.

Rogers asked about the impact on the economy from the presence of organized research. Helfferich said in practical monetary terms there's a five to one ratio in the amount the state spends. There are tens of millions of dollars brought into the state for salaries and products bought from local merchants. He said the money is not just in Fairbanks. It spreads out over the state. McLane said there is a considerable amount of money coming in from outside of the state. It is a considerable input into the economy. The output is trained graduate students who move into positions in government agencies and continue to contribute in the future. As an Alaskan he prefers to see students trained in Alaska taking positions with the state agencies such as Fish and Game. Helfferich talked about people coming from outside as consultants and making decisions without knowledge of the conditions or being tied to the community.

Rogers asked about pay scales of university faculty and the research faculty. McLane said a recent study contracted by the university showed the pay scale was compatible with those existing in comparable outside universities and generally is less than pay in industry. There is a single faculty pay scale for instructional and research faculty.

Rogers said at the university there is a feeling the legislators don't understand organized research and among legislators there is a feeling the faculty and staff at the university don't understand the legislative process. He asked what methods they might use to improve each group's understanding of the other. McLane said he agrees with both of the observations. He said they do need to take every opportunity to inform the state, the citizens, and the legislators about what they do and how it contributes. He would like to see more contact between individual faculty members and the legislators and explain what they do. He thinks the faculty can do a better job explaining what they do than the administrators. Helfferich said he feels the legislature has a distinct responsibility to look at what the university does and decide whether or not it is of value to the state. He is concerned what they look at overall is a pot of money without a clear understanding what the university is engaged in and why. He thinks the legislators need to come to the university and gain a further understanding.

Rogers asked McLane to explain what he does. McLane said he has been interested for some years in how animals exist in arctic and sub-arctic environments. He asks the question how would the environment be different if there weren't animals in it. He has worked on a variety of organisms including birds, small mammals, and insects. They are proposing they will pursue money from the Department of Energy to investigate riparian ecosystems of arctic Alaska. Riparian areas are the first to feel the impact of development. He talked about studying the productivity of riparian areas and hopefully guide development to indicate what would be lost if riparian areas are removed. They would be able to suggest alternative routing for developmental pathways. Helfferich said showing how

research is a great value over a period of time is what needs to be done. McLane talked about information need and responding to it.