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Patrick O'Rourke

Interviewer: Scott Sterling

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Scott Sterling said Patrick O'Rourke will be talking about post-secondary education in Alaska. Sterling asked O'Rourke how long he had been in Alaska. O'Rourke said he has been in Alaska since 1964 and in the Alaska university system since 1970. He started out on the University of Alaska Fairbanks went to Bethel and then Anchorage and then back to Fairbanks. Sterling commented on his being around while the system has seen a lot of growth. He asked O'Rourke if the troubles in the 1970s at the university were due to too much money or not enough. O'Rourke said it was neither of those. The university was growing from a single campus to a university system and had not set up the appropriate managerial mechanisms to be able to develop it. He thinks the university system, when Bob Hiatt took over in 1973, had relatively antiquated technology to be able to manage its affairs. As they attempted to move to some new technology it was questionable about how adequately it was brought along.

Sterling asked how large the university system was now in terms of how many students are enrolled. O'Rourke said roughly 30-32,00 students enrolled across the state taking one course or more. Sterling asked about the size of the community college. O'Rourke said the community colleges comprise about two thirds the size of the entire enrollment of the University of Alaska system so there would be about 20,000 students in that portion of the system. The University of Alaska Fairbanks would be the largest of the university institutions. They generally have 5,500 to 6,000 students enrolled. The University of Alaska Anchorage has about 3,000-3,500 enrolled. The University of Alaska Juneau has about 1,500-1,800 enrolled.

Sterling asked if the University of Alaska was on track with providing the kind of higher education that we will need in the future to manage a global economy. He thought Alaska is becoming more important in economic and trade potential. O'Rourke said whenever they talk about the university it is difficult to talk about the university being on track because there are so many entities and pieces to it. He said in many ways the University of Alaska system is overextended to be able to adequately meet the challenges of the balance of this century. As they take a look at state revenues the reality is we are still 88 percent oil dependent in this state. He thinks we will remain that way for a period of time and there are going to be some declining revenues. He describes the decade of the 1970s as an attempt by the University of Alaska system to meet a mission of access. During that period of time they saw expansion out to many other areas of the state. There were two institutions in Anchorage and many small rural units throughout the state. It was a decade of improved access. The decentralization of the state operated schools with the Molly Hootch decision could have also been a spur to do the same thing with both secondary and higher education to an extent. He thought there were certain problems that will need to be faced over the next decade. As they attempt to build depth of program at a number of campuses there is not going to be the resources there to continue the same degree of access and the depth of program. High tech in the next decade has a number of implications. High tech will mean rapid

changes in the type of technology used in instruction and heavy equipment investment. He said unfortunately the lifespan will be relatively short to stay on the cutting edge. It will be difficult for the university systems to keep up. He asked if what we are currently doing in the university system is what we need to be doing over the next decade or two. Are community colleges going to meet the needs and expectations in rural Alaska. These are two-year colleges by definition. Most of the employment in rural Alaska is professional in nature. Community colleges will not be able to fully meet the needs and expectations in that area.

Sterling asked O'Rourke to explain the land-grant mission. O'Rourke said typically within the land grant mission you have teaching, research and service. And in the research and service component you think of the extension type of model. Problems are identified, translated back to research faculty who engage in a solution to those problems and then communicate it back out in the form of problem resolutions through specialist and extension educators in the field. In the U.S. that had traditionally been in agricultural and some in mining areas. The University of Alaska expanded that notion to include broader continuing education functions and fisheries and other areas. He gave several examples of this type of service. Within this scope of mission, the University of Alaska system through its expansion over the decade of the 1970s was part of building that broad extension base. The research element had evolved in the 1950s and 1960s although there have been gaps. The teaching component has always been fairly dominant. Their conferences and institutes program which is part of the public service portion serves about 10,000 people over the course of a year. He said the University of Alaska system probably touches about 150,000 Alaskans over the course of a single year. He thought maybe they need to focus and become more integrated in their approach to the treatment of problems and topics.

Sterling asked about the notion of limiting enrollment. O'Rourke said he isn't sure he put that into the planning document. He said given the current economic picture they may have to limit enrollment sometime in the future at least at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and Anchorage. He thinks there is room for further absorption at the University of Alaska Juneau and many of the community colleges. Anchorage Community College might have a problem and it might be a problem for them being an open entry institution. There is a question of offering quality instruction to a limited number of students or do they offer instruction for all. He said Alaska has the mentality of bigger is better in many ways. He isn't quite sure he thinks it is. He said given the rapid growth patterns in Anchorage they will rapidly outgrow the University of Alaska Fairbanks in size. He asked what the University of Alaska Fairbanks should become. He said in his mind it is the historic institution in the system. It is the institution that carries the primary land-grant function and the seat of organized research and this institution should become the high-quality institution in the state. He thinks its quality has continued to grow and he thinks it is something they should concentrate on more and more. He said they need to build some depth of program and need to make sure you have appropriate sub-disciplines covered adequately. If you continue to get 10 percent increase in resources per year and the enrollment increases by 15 percent it means the majority of your new resources if not all of them are going into just meeting the new students coming to your doorstep. He said that has to be regulated so they have established a goal of plateauing at 5,000 FTE students. He thinks at that time they will be able to hold there by gradually narrowing their entrance requirements and to restrict those slightly. He thinks that will be at a gradual pace. It will allow them to bring their existing facilities up to par to meet that target enrollment. He thinks they will see this figure in the fall of 1987. It would allow them to plan much more discreetly and adequately over the next period of time. So, as they bring their existing staff and facilities up to par at

the same time they are saying they can open up enrollment about 1991 and by 1995 they can be at 6,000. He said it is difficult to plan with an open-ended thing that never has any closure to it.

Sterling asked if the community colleges will absorb the students. O'Rourke said it depended on where you are. He thought they would find students who would be considered marginal for the university and should be advised to go to a community college. Their projections for growth are for a fifty or sixty percent increase by 1990 for the entire University of Alaska system. A certain portion of that will be absorbed within existing programs without the needs for new resources. If the trend line is true and the revenues are going down then they will find some students will not be able to be served at University of Alaska institutions. He hopes that they will.

Sterling asked O'Rourke to talk about politics, conflict and the University of Alaska. O'Rourke said there are probably a number of reasons why that occurs. He thinks there is a rotation and other state agencies are singled out periodically by the legislature. He said the university has been in the headlines a lot this year although the last few years it has been relatively low key. Part of the reason is the university being a quasi-fourth branch of government. It doesn't fall under state government in the same way as other state agencies. It stands out in a very prevalent fashion. There is also some feeling by popularly elected representatives that periodically university representatives might need to understand the populous as they do.

Sterling said half of the Alaska Legislature has either attended or graduated from the University of Alaska so there must be some kind of feeling for it. He asked if the University of Alaska is educating for those careers and professions providing the best chances for opportunities in the future or does it emphasize the traditional functions of the university. O'Rourke said you would have to be talking about one of the units of the university system to address that question. The broad mission of the university has a variety of things embraced. The University of Alaska Fairbanks is the only Ph. D granting institution in the state at the present time. He thinks there is a balance. They do need to educate people toward the professions that are going to provide them with a livelihood. The enrollment within the last five years has been heavy toward the engineering professions, education professions, and the School of Management which has doubled in size in the last five years. He thinks they have a responsibility to go beyond just that professional training and they need to continue to assure their students have a broad-based background in the arts and social sciences because they are going to be citizens of the state, nation and world.

Sterling asked how the university graduates are faring in the state. O'Rourke thought they are doing quite well and it varies from discipline to discipline. He said they don't have in place a whole program to follow up graduates like he would like to see. He talked about the graduates he does know about and the teaching profession.

Sterling asked about capital projects. O'Rourke said for the University of Alaska Fairbanks they would like to see a new addition to the library, the engineering building and a new student resident facility starting this summer. Down the line their highest priority would be a new teaching research facility which would be combined. They would like to have the last two stories of the Duckering building addition. They would then be able to vacate Brooks Hall and have some major reconstruction there. At the system level they are going to have major developments in the Anchorage area. There are two or three community colleges without any campuses at all.

