



**MAUREEN AND MIKE
MANSFIELD LIBRARY**

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: OH 454-001
Interviewee: Royce C. Engstrom
Interviewer: Donna McCrea
Date of Interview: August 29, 2017
Project: Royce C. Engstrom Oral History Project

Donna McCrea (DM): Today is August 29th of 2017. This is Donna McCrea, Head of Archives and Special Collections. And I'm here today interviewing University of Montana former provost and former president Royce Engstrom. Royce, thank you very much for joining me today.

Royce C. Engstrom (RE): Thanks, Donna.

DM: As we were just discussing I have a list of questions, and I might get through them and I might not. But I just want to start with kind of an informal—tell me briefly about your childhood and your family and where you grew up and what you remember. What were sort of your formative years?

RE: Okay. So I consider Omaha, Nebraska as my home in terms of growing up. I wasn't born there. I was born in Michigan but moved to Omaha at a pretty young age, and we moved a couple of other places over those years. But basically we kept coming back to Omaha so I view Omaha as where I grew up. And then I spent a few years in Wisconsin in graduate school and then a good part of my career—28 years in South Dakota. So I sort of am a product of the wide open [laughs] prairie, I guess, before coming to Montana now 10 some years ago. So my parents were educated through the high school level. I ended up being the first person in either of my parents' families to go to college—much less graduate school, but, you know, I had a really good stable, supportive family. And, you know, I had probably one of the best family experiences that I could have hoped for in terms of good parents, good siblings, and things like that. And my dad got out of the Navy—had been in World War II—got out of the Navy and went to work as a mechanic. And so he was in the trucking industry for his career and just sort of worked his way up through different positions in that industry until he owned his own business. And so he was a very proud, successful small businessman I guess you would say. And that was something that, you know, was very important to him. So although he and I joked about it quite a bit I ended up inheriting his work ethic. He was a very hard worker, and I've always joked with him that I never wanted to work. I didn't really want to get a job and things [laughs] like that. But in the end I, you know, ended up working harder probably than he did, and he was very amused at all of that.

So as a kid I spent a lot of time outdoors. We lived sort of on the edge of Omaha so it was easy to just, you know, run around the fields and things like that. And so had that kind of experience growing up—a very formative experience for me was in high school when I worked on a cattle ranch in Western Nebraska in the Sandhills of Nebraska. And that was for just a family rancher. He wasn't connected to our family. I actually got to have this opportunity because of Boy Scouts it turns out. But that was a very important experience for me and one that I learned a lot of life

lessons about, you know—how to fix things, how to problem solve, how to just work hard and get things done. So I always consider that as almost a second upbringing in a way. I got interested in science as a pretty young kid. I remember by the sixth grade being pretty interested in science. And I just, a couple of anecdotes, I guess, about that—things that helped encourage me in that direction. So when I was in sixth grade a few of us kids got together, and we went to our teacher and we said we wanted to start a rocket club. [laughs] And, you know, the teacher could have laughed that off or whatever, but she didn't. She took it very seriously. Mrs. Holly was her name, and she set up a room for us and she got us books from the library and various materials about rockets and things like that. And was a very nurturing kind of a teacher. And so I'm sure that that played an important role in my developing interest in science. And then I remember about that same time looking through some magazine—probably *Boys Life Magazine* or something like that—and finding in there a sort of a book collection that you—a book club that you could sign up for once a month, you know. And they come in this little paperbacks, and it was a science collection. And I remember telling my folks who at that time didn't have very much disposable income and all. And I said, "I want to subscribe to this because it will teach me how to be a scientist," or whatever. [laughs] And at first they, you know, they said, "Well we can't afford that." But they came around and they did afford it. And so once a month I would get these, you know, kind of sixth grade targeted books, I guess, about various aspects of science. And I particularly remember one about astronomy and, you know, taking these stickers and paste them in the book and then reading about the planets and things like that. And it just had a lasting effect on me if I remember something that small today. I mean it was a big thing back then. So, you know, over the years and I did all the things that kids did—I tended to be somebody who worked more outside of high school as opposed to being involved in a lot of clubs and things like that. So I worked at a gas station. I worked at a veterinarian. I worked at a motor and engine repair shop. Things like—I was very interested in doing things with my hands and that sort of thing. So I wasn't necessarily a real scholarly kid or anything but got involved in a lot of outside things. And then when I got to high school—[laughs] my high school chemistry experience was terrible, actually.

DM: Oh, really? [laughs]

RE: Yeah. I, you know, I was a junior in high school. I had other things on my mind, and I didn't care for the teacher and all that. So I did quite poorly in high school chemistry. By the end of the year though I found myself sort of enjoying chemistry in spite of the teacher and my relationship with the teacher and things like that. So in my senior year I took physics, and I just really loved it and did a lot of special projects and stayed after school to do work and things like that. So then when I did get to college I entered college like a lot of young people maybe interested in science but not really having any science role models around. I entered college thinking that I would be a pre-med student or maybe a pre-vet student since I had worked for a veterinarian. But in a very important thing happened during my freshman year in General Chemistry—one of the professors kind of approached me and invited me to get involved in some research. And so I did fairly early on—and that fairly quickly clinched for me my interest

in science, you know, and research and things like that. And that is something that I practice to this day is talking to freshman students about getting [laughs] involved in research.

DM: Right.

RE: And I have more to say about that as we go along. But that was a very important experience for me. And so actually probably by the time I was a sophomore in college I had, you know, abandoned the idea of going to medical school. And I was already on sort of a research—kind of an academic track, I guess. I mean that was what interested me and I, you know, unlike many students today I was—I would say completely unconcerned about getting a job when I graduated from college. I just for whatever reason wasn't much on my mind. I just enjoyed being there. I enjoyed the college experience. I enjoyed learning. And then made the decision to go to graduate school along the way. And originally I was going to take a year off in between and travel the world or whatever. But I just—circumstances arose, and I just decided to go right on. So I had a pretty traditional four-year college experience followed by a four-year doctoral experience at the University of Wisconsin.

DM: Both of them? You stayed right where you were?

RE: The undergraduate experience was at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

DM: Okay.

RE: I just stayed at home during my college years—

DM: Okay.

RE: —and did my undergraduate there. And then went off to Wisconsin for graduate school.

DM: Why did you pick Wisconsin?

RE: I only applied to about three graduate schools—partly I guess because I didn't know that much about other schools—partly I don't know. I don't have a good answer for that. I mean there were just three schools that I happened to be interested in. As an undergrad I did an undergraduate research participant project through the National Science Foundation at Washington State University one summer.

DM: Okay.

RE: And I spent the summer working on a project out there. And so that was one of the schools I looked at. I looked at Wisconsin just because I probably got good advice from faculty members about a good quality program, and I looked at UW of Milwaukee as well because they had a water science program associated with the Great Lakes and that was interesting to me at the

time. But I have to say I didn't realize at that time how good of a program Wisconsin was. But after being there a couple of years and certainly since then I've come to realize I sort of lucked into going to one of the best chemistry departments in the country.

DM: Right. Did you have an area that you wanted to focus on at that particular point when you—and you decided right away you were going to do a whole Ph.D. program?

RE: I did. Again in talking with some faculty advisers as an undergrad I kind of figured out that if I knew I was going on for the Ph.D. I didn't have to do a master's degree or, you know, that was—and I think that's still kind of the way. So I just went right on for the Ph.D., and I did have an area of interest—a sub discipline called “analytical chemistry.” And it's really the science of figuring out what things are made of and their compositions and concentrations and things like that, and I think I drifted that way primarily because that was the area of this faculty member that kind of took me under his wing early on. So I just got very interested in all of that. However I didn't know if I was cut out for it when I first got involved in analytical chemistry because the first course in analytical chemistry you do a lot of titrations with indicators that changed colors, and I'm color blind. And so some of those indicators I couldn't quite see, you know, and I thought, “Oh, how can I ever be an analytical chemist if I can't see these indicators, you know.” As it turns out that's a minute part of analytical chemistry—in today's world especially. It's, you know, it's all become more instrumental and things like that, but I was worried about it at first.

DM: At what point did you decide that what you really wanted to do is stay in academia and become a professor? And were you thinking that you wanted to be just a re—not just—a research professor or did you know that you wanted to teach students and at what level?

RE: Yeah. So by the time I was done with my undergraduate work I was pretty focused on an academic career and thought that that's what I really wanted to do. And when I was in graduate school I sort of distinctly didn't want to go into an industrial kind of a position, and again, that was sort of just my narrow-mindedness at the time. I, you know, I just thought, “Oh, what a great life this is and I just loved doing this research and why would anybody want to go into industry where somebody else told you what you what you had to do.” [laughs] Things like that. I have a much better [laughs] view of that whole thing now but at the time I just really liked that what I saw as that lifestyle. And yeah, I wanted to teach and do research and, you know, just kind of be immersed in an academic world. So that was the direction I headed pretty quickly actually.

DM: And how long did you do sort of that traditional teaching and at what point—I see at one point you became chair of your department and then you kind of headed into administration. Can you talk about why you decided that you were—or did you decide that you wanted to be chair and then how you decided that administration was a good fit for you?

RE: Yeah. So I kind of think of my chemistry career as about the first 20 years roughly of my career. And then the second 18 years now as sort of the administrative part of it. Although that

wasn't a clear boundary. I mean there was a lot of overlap in both directions. But when I—so I went to the University of South Dakota right out of graduate school and took a position as an assistant professor of chemistry there. And again just totally loved it and just immersed myself in it, you know, full speed. And I loved teaching. I loved working with students. I loved doing research and just all of the other aspects of academic life that you and I both enjoy. But so about five years into my career—not very long—the person who had been the chairman of our Department—a fellow named Chuck Estee—he had been chairman of the Chemistry Department for 32 years, and everybody loved him. He did a great job and all of that, but there came a time when the Dean decided that 32 years [laughs] was long enough. And so the Dean really sort of forced him to step down as chair. And the Dean approached me to be the Chair. You know, I was pretty young at the time and so I—in fact I was the youngest person in the department so I had to become the Chair of all these people who had years of experience. And it was quite daunting—quite intimidating in a way, but I really liked the idea of it and I spent 11 years as Department Chair—not 32 but 11 and learned to make some difficult decisions there. I had to make a negative tenure decision, and it turned out it was the first one in the department's history. And it was, you know, a difficult thing to do, and I learned pretty early on the impact of making personnel decisions and how it affects people's lives and things like that. So I think I've always had a, you know, sort of a good understanding I guess of the impact that you have as a decision maker. You know, it's hard to treat those kind of decisions just abstractly and totally objectively—I mean cause you're always affecting somebody's life.

But anyway so I became Department Chair at a fairly young age. And then along the way I got involved in a program called “EPSCOR,” and that's “Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research.” And it was a program originally of the National Science Foundation designed to help states like South Dakota and Montana become more competitive at getting federal research dollars. And so I was a very active researcher—always had a big research group that worked with me ranging from high school students to visiting professors and everything in between. And I always had anywhere from six to ten researchers in my group, and I loved that part of the job. So I was very research active so I got involved in this EPSCOR program first for the kind of representing or working at the level of the University of South Dakota. But then becoming the director of this program for the state of South Dakota and even then becoming the Chair of the National EPSCOR Coalition which was sort of the group that worked with Congress to keep putting money into this program and putting money into research in general. I became Chair of the National EPSCOR Foundation which was a group that worked with the agencies like NSF and the states to design their EPSCOR program. So I got very involved in this research effort. And so I was doing a fair amount of what you would—what became or what is called “research administration.” So there came a point at the University of South Dakota where the Office of Research for the university—that fellow decided to step down from that job. And so I applied for and got that job which was essentially the—became the Vice President for Research while I was in it. So my entry into central administration was really through that research route. That's how I got sort of into the central administration—the President's Cabinet—things like that. So I served as that Research Vice President for several years, and we had great success during that time at the University of South Dakota which isn't really known as

a powerful research institution but relative to where we were. We really excelled right at the research going on there. And then sort of in that same position I picked up the role of Graduate Dean as well when that got merged. So I did that for a few years but then kind of got to the point where I started thinking, "You know, to really have the kind of influence over the university that I wanted you needed to be the provost." And somewhere along right in that same time I spent a year in the board office in the capital of South Dakota—Pierre, South Dakota—working with the Board of Regents or the staff of the regents essentially. What would be equivalent to our Commissioner of Higher Education. And in that role my special focus was again research development for the state of South Dakota. So I kind of got exposed to that system level of work along the way.

So then the provost job came open. I applied for that and got that. Not actually, I should—I didn't get it the first time. I applied for it and this other person got the job so I stayed in the research role. And then after a few years that person stepped out of the job, and I applied and then went to the provost role. So I served as provost there at South Dakota for a little under four years and part of that was an interim role. And so then I started looking at the possibility of moving on into the presidency or a chancellorship role, and I did look at a couple of schools in both cases applied and got into the final three—but didn't get selected for the role. And so then, you know, I wasn't sure that that's necessarily the route that I wanted to go, but I kind of got to the point where I realized that I needed broader experience if I was going to go on in further in administration. I needed experience beyond the University of South Dakota. So the job of provost here became open, but I actually got called by the search committee here asking if I was interested in applying. And at the time I was very involved in this EPSCOR stuff, and I just couldn't quite back out of that. And so I didn't apply for provost here. But then you may recall they didn't succeed in searching for a provost, and George Dennison actually served as interim provost for a year or so. So then they redid the search. Teresa Branch actually chaired the second round of the search, and they called again and it was a year later and so I kind of said, "Okay. I'll look at it." So I did and interestingly one of the other finalists for the provost position here was one of the deans that worked for me at South Dakota. He had been interested in it as well, and I had hired him as a dean at South Dakota. And so we had a beer together at the Doubletree over here the night of the interview or the night before the interview.

DM: Not awkward?

RE: No, we got along very well and still do to this day. So I mean it was a little awkward but not too bad. [laughs] So then I was thrilled to get the call from George offering me the job as provost here and so we packed up and came to Montana.

DM: Good. So I know we don't have a whole lot more time today, but I wanted since you mentioned "we" if it is okay to ask. Would you just share a little bit about your wife and your family sort of—

RE: Sure.

DM: —of briefly kind of where you met and how long you've been together.

RE: Yeah. So my wife, Mary, and I have been married for 38 years now. We met in Wisconsin when I was there as a graduate student. It's kind of a funny story. It was totally a setup, and I had rented a room from a woman who turned out lived a few blocks away from Mary's mother. They knew each other—these two women very well. And so they concocted a dinner, you know, that brought Mary and I together. And so I met her there and so then we started dating and a year later ended up getting married. So she was a K-12 educator at the time. And so when we moved to South Dakota she worked in the K-12 system, and she did that for nearly 20 years. And then she decided to go back and get her doctorate, and she got that at the University of South Dakota. And then she became a faculty member there and went through the tenure process and got tenured and that's right about the time we moved here. So when we came here she worked in UM Online and was one of the instructional designers there helping faculty members put their courses online and things like that. And she really enjoyed that and still is very good at that sort of thing. And so I—she's my advisor when it comes to technology—

DM: Nice.

RE: —in the classroom and [laughter] things like that. And then we had two kids—Tyler and Carrie. And so now our son Tyler is married, and he lives in Ithaca, New York with Ellie, his wife. Our daughter Carrie is married, and they live ironically back in Omaha and with her husband Pete and their two kids. So we see them as frequently as we can. Good kids. Our son, Tyler, got his Ph.D. in physics at Penn State and now he's in a post-doc position at Syracuse University. Our daughter is a physician's assistant and is now working as the Clinical Director for UNO—University of Nebraska at Omaha for their PA program.

DM: Nice.

RE: Yeah.

DM: And Mary was okay with coming to Montana, obviously?

RE: She was. She loved the idea partly because people who she knew well told her that Missoula was a lot like Madison, Wisconsin. A real progressive town—kind of outspoken, a lot going on, arts and science and things like that. And everybody told her, "Oh, you'll love it, you know, don't worry about it." So she moved here sight unseen actually. Or at least I accepted the job as provost before she came here. We came right after that and looked for houses and things. But she was just sure she was gonna love it, and she has.

DM: Good.

RE: She loves it tremendously. In fact that is one of the reasons we made the decision to stay in the community is because we both love it here so much and made very good friends and things like that.

DM: Good. Well I know we have about five minutes left for today. Would you be willing just to start talking about your vision as provost and what it was that appealed to you again about the University of Montana and what opportunities you saw when you came in as provost?

RE: Sure. So I viewed and still view the University of Montana as a very special place academically and part of that has to do with the outspokenness of this community—an attribute that we'll talk more about later, I'm sure. But I viewed Missoula, Montana and the University of Montana as a place where people think deeply about academics and a place where people love the notion of mentoring students and trying new things and having sort of this special characteristic of wanting to tackle tough subjects and tough ideas. But in a, you know, a very—most of the time healthy, vibrant way. And that really was attractive to me. And so I had been thinking for many years about undergraduate education and how we as a community have historically done, I think, quite a great job of educating people in their chosen specialties. So if you're a chemistry major I think we've done a great job for, you know, since the '50s and probably before that of educating people about chemistry. If you're a political science major we've done a great job of educating people about political science and so on. But I also have felt that we have done a poor job of providing people the context and when that—in which that specialty resides. So when I was a chemistry major, you know, I was immersed in chemistry and yeah, I took all the gen eds and things like that. But in a way that didn't provide a connectedness for me, and I don't think we do a very [laughs] good job of that yet to this day. But I saw Montana—the University of Montana—as a place that would be very amenable—very interested in thinking deeply about undergraduate education and saying, “How do we do a better job of preparing people to be great citizens in a democracy? How do we prepare people to be leaders?” And one of the things that I thought we needed to do more of is provide that context—that connectedness between—okay—I'm a chemistry major. How does that relate to a political science person? How does it relate to economics? How does it relate to the arts? And think of it more in terms of the big questions—the big problems that we have before us. And so my hope in our next session to talk about what has become the Global Leadership Initiative because to me that embodies the sort of the approach—not the answer to—but an approach to addressing that question. Incidentally I've been reading over the course of this summer four books to essentially review for an organization called AAC&U—the Association of American Colleges and Universities. And that's an organization that is devoted to the concept of a liberal education—the concept of a contextual education. So it very much aligns with what I was thinking about or what I have thought about for a lot of my career. And so these books that I'm reading today illustrate perfectly for me this exact dilemma that we, you know, how we produce specialists and despite our efforts in the general education world we are less than totally effective in giving people this context. So that was something that was very much on my mind at the time I came here, and I thought, “Gosh, if anybody can pull this off it's the University of Montana.” So history will tell if we [laughs] pulled it off or not, but I mean I think

this is the place where people have the right mindset to think about those big issues—those big questions—and how we can teach our students to become engaged in them.

DM: Good. I think that's probably a great stopping point because that'll be a perfect place for us to pick up—

RE: Okay.

DM: —when we meet next.

RE: Good. Okay.

DM: Thank you.

RE: Yeah. Thanks, Donna.