



## DU ORAL HISTORY 1984-2014

**Interviewee: Gregg Kvistad**

**Interviewer: James (Jim) R. Griesemer**

Recorded: August 15, 2019

Place: Denver, CO

Transcriber: Terry L. Zdrale

### Transcript

- Introduction: [00:00](#) Series Introduction.
- Jim Griesemer: [00:20](#) Welcome to the University of Denver's oral history. The interviews in this series present a panorama of progress against steep odds. Stories told by men and women who were personally involved in saving the university and undertaking an extraordinary process of renewal. We've divided our story into three parts. The first being DU's severe financial crisis in the 1980's, then the dramatic financial turnaround in the early 1990s followed by a decade of renewal and growth. Our guest today is DU's provost Emeritus Greg Kvistad. Greg has been at the university during all these periods and played a major role in helping to lead DU's renewal. Greg Kvistad, welcome to DU's oral history.
- Gregg Kvistad: [01:09](#) Thank you. Jim.
- Jim Griesemer: [01:10](#) Earlier in your career you had an interesting series of educational experiences in the U S and abroad. Could you tell us a bit about those and then how you ended up at, at the University of Denver?
- Gregg Kvistad: [01:22](#) Sure. I grew up in Minnesota and I went to the University of Minnesota. I was a one of those public school kids and did my PhD work at Berkeley. And I became very interested in German politics and in particular as theories of the state. It was pretty theoretical stuff. And what I found, there was an extraordinary system. This was the University of California system that was really probably the most advanced and supported education system that the world has seen. People were taxed. They will actually pay those taxes and the system was built up. So my experience was to essentially work and study in this system for nine years pretty much tuition free which I did not appreciate at the time, was such a deal. I got a

Fulbright fellowship and I spent a year in Germany doing my research on my dissertation on German politics.

- Gregg Kvistad: [02:40](#) I returned to Berkeley and I saw an ad for a, a leave replacement position Sabbatical, a replacement position at Wellesley College, which was anything but a large public institution. I went to Wellesley for two years and taught and found an extraordinary setting where I literally learned how to teach. And I learned that I loved teaching. I knew I loved reading and writing. I didn't know. I love teaching. At the end of those two years, I got a call from a person here at the University of Denver asking me to come for an interview. And I did not know what that was about. Literally, I had not applied for a job. And it was a project that was being developed in political science and economics to bring together what we would today call a knowledge bridge of young academics working in the field of political economy. Economists, sociologists, political scientists, and he invited me to come for an interview for this position. And I did and I thought, okay, this sounds really interesting. And I will just move to DU. That was in 1984.
- Jim Griesemer: [04:04](#) Now you came here during a time that former Chancellor Dwight Smith called the perfect storm as a new a young professor, were you aware of what DU, is going through and its financial turbulence at that point? Uh,
- Gregg Kvistad: [04:21](#) No, I was not. I did receive a copy of a June, 1984 memo without any sort of introduction to what this actually meant. And I did notice in the memo that there was a, a little paragraph about special concern about the political science department and I took that as positive that there was going to be some grants investment. And I was looking forward to joining this, this group of young folks. I came settled down drove out here with a u haul and then I had lunch with the chair of the Economics Department who said, you have not done anything like you didn't buy anything recently, did you? I said, I actually bought my first new car, never had a new car. And he said you're at risk of losing your job in the next month. And I thought, holy cow, you know, moving from Berkeley, this, this comprehensive, well-supported university to this, this well supported Liberal

Arts College to DU. I did not know what to think. And it was a little, it was, it was sobering to say the least and I thought, okay, just do your work. Do your teaching, do your research. Just kind of keep your head down and see how things fall out.

Jim Griesemer: [05:52](#) Well, you kept your job. What kinds of things did you do from that point as a young academic professional?

Gregg Kvistad: [06:00](#) The things that I guess I have recommended that most young professors engage in, which is make sure that you are really doing your job and that job for a tenure track faculty member historically has been, make sure you are paying attention to your students, teaching them well taking the teaching very seriously and do your research get out there and go to conferences, get published. There was much less concerned about service at that time and it wasn't really clear what service meant at the university when we were in such straights. There was a group of senior faculty members at the time, I think it was called the committee on constructive change. And Marshall Haith was part of that. And a few others and I thought, okay they will help us along, work with the administration through whatever needs to be worked through. So I was very well supported by senior faculty members emotionally and otherwise. They were concerned about the young folks. And as it turned out, we were able to keep our jobs.

Jim Griesemer: [07:18](#) So Dan Ritchie became the chancellor of the university in mid-19, 1989 as a still untenured assistant professor. How did you view Dan's arrival once you understood the milieu you that you were involved in?

Gregg Kvistad: [07:35](#) Yeah I had just come back from Berlin. I had spent almost two years on a postdoc in Berlin and my wife and I weren't sure that we were coming back to the university. But we did. And a few months after that, Dan was appointed chancellor and I remember seeing him in one of the buildings. He was walking through the building and there was there was a group of people kind of behind him taking notes and I thought, this is different. I'm not sure what that means. And then he met with the faculty and he said you will not recognize this institution in five years. And a lot of us didn't know what to make of that. And it sounded like something that, well that would be really nice if that were not the

case if we didn't recognize it because it was a much better place.

- Gregg Kvistad: [08:32](#) That was, that was the goal. Obviously that was what he was communicating. But very, very soon after his appointment, it became clear even to people like me, the lowest of the low faculty members, untenured assistant professors, that something was a foot and it a good thing. He took very seriously interacting with the entire community, including the faculty. You also was very clear about his boundaries, which is, he was a chancellor, he was the so called nontraditional, not so nontraditional today, but back then not coming up through the faculty ranks. And he said, we're going to work together and make this a better place.
- Jim Griesemer: [09:22](#) Now, eventually you did receive tenure. And from that point on, you've had a remarkable career at the university, not necessarily traveling to Germany to do postdocs, but rather sort of in the trenches, in a, in a very much of a, of a leadership role. Could you describe the sort of the progression you got tenure, I think in the early nineties and then from then on?
- Gregg Kvistad: [09:50](#) Yeah, I did receive tenure and oddly in the scheme of things, the way these things usually work, I was asked to become department chair immediately after receiving tenure, which was, is about six years too early because I had another research project in Germany that I was going to go to. So I decided to defer that. And during those early years in the early nineties, I became, began to feel an affinity to the institution, which is not something that all faculty members easily develop. They have affinity to the professional associations and their scholarship. I, I totally understand that, but I thought we were on to something that was pretty exciting here. And the forward momentum was extraordinary. I was department chair for six years and in 1997, or I guess early 98, I was asked to throw my hat in to be dean of the divisions of arts, humanities, and social sciences.
- Gregg Kvistad: [10:55](#) And I thought I did that with a bit of trepidation. I've never sought I at that time, I had never sought academic leadership positions. I felt that this was a service that one does for an institution. And I, and I really mean that, that that's, I'm not, that's not self-deprecating. It, it just is not something that I was

striving to do. I did get appointed to this position and I remember walking with Dan Ritchie back to his office and he said, you have no idea what you're getting yourself into. He said, that is exactly true.

Jim Griesemer: [11:33](#)

Well, you, for a number of years, you and I were colleague deans you in the arts, humanities and social sciences, and I was dean of the business school. So I know firsthand how impressive your achievements were in that college. And among those was your ability to manage the financial dimensions. Of the school and that may not sound too extraordinary unless one understands that most liberal arts colleges have a terrible time even breaking even. And I think what's what I've always wondered about is you accomplish that you, you've got the finances in order and you, but you move the college forward academically. And how did you, you know, those are often seen as competing dimensions. How did you do that?

Gregg Kvistad: [12:36](#)

You're, I think you're right, Jim, over the years I have learned that there isn't always that financial awareness that academic leaders, especially at the department chair level and at least among some deans not necessarily here at the university that this is seen as well. Someone else is going to do the money and I'm going to build programs. I learned really almost the first day I set foot on the campus at the University of Denver. It doesn't work that way. And it can't work that way. So what I tried to do is to imbue that, that ethos into these two divisions. And that means gently speaking to folks about resources that we have or do not have. It's listening, trying to work with, with department chairs about what we needed to do, but also say, well, you know, that's a really good idea, but we've got to delay that for a year or two.

Gregg Kvistad: [13:43](#)

So yeah, the, the, the mantra then, and that's one that I've tried to use in my entire career at the university is first you earn the money and then you spend it as opposed to hoping and keeping your fingers crossed. That's not always possible to do. And there are opportunities that one last take sometimes. We had early on in the early two thousands when Bob Kuhn became chancellor, we received a gift from Tom and Sidney Marsico. It was a \$10 million gift and the gift was to, meant to fundamentally transform the

undergraduate experience at the University of Denver. The psychological impact of that gift on the arts and sciences that would be arts and social sciences and natural sciences and math and mathematics was huge because for the first time an external party to the university had made a commitment to academically this wasn't a new building and we were building those and those were wonderful.

Gregg Kvistad: [14:57](#)

This was about faculty. Can you do it? Can you put something together that would transform the experience of undergraduates? We put something together that was pretty extraordinary. We pulled together a group of faculty members, none of whom really believed that this was real. And we had five years to experiment with the number of pilot programs. And, and we spent out the \$10 million experimenting with those pilot programs, writing up the results of that, adding some, dropping some. And at the end of it, we put together a program that still exists today. There's a writing program that is still ranked as one of the top undergraduate writing programs in the United States. We've also expanded that to two graduate students. We have these first year seminars and these, these senior levels seminars that have become part of the hallmark of the university first year experience and students still love and talk about these and faculty members are, we're told that they may not teach their subject matter expertise.

Gregg Kvistad: [16:09](#)

They've got to do something that's a little bit outside. So I was, just a very quick anecdote. I was in Seattle last week welcoming first year students to the university prior to their arrival at the university. So we're meeting with first year students and their parents. I was talking about that this first year seminar and I said, you've all signed up for one. And I asked the young woman in front of me, I said, so which one? And I was explaining that these are not research topics. I said, so which one did you sign up for? She said, I signed up for the history of bathrooms and said, well, okay, I didn't know that. And she said, no, it's really, really interesting. And I, the parents were sort of looking and I said, actually what she is going to learn is that everything has a history.

Gregg Kvistad: [17:00](#)

Even something as mundane as this thing that is part of our lives that we don't think much about. So we did this.

We spent at the end of that program over about three years, we cobbled together a little bit over \$4 million to implement those programs on a permanent basis. And we hired a lot of faculty members. The, the writing program was transformed and we are still getting accolades for this because we put actual PhDs in that program to be teaching, not graduate students from the English department, which is what most universities do. So that was a lot of fun. I loved working with the faculty on that. I think we did it financially responsible and really the important thing was the faculty felt that someone had entrusted them to do something great at the university.

Jim Griesemer: [18:03](#)

As you said, that's had an enormous impact on the university. What are there a few other examples of things during your tenure as dean in, you had a lot of departments who were running the largest college areas that you focused on or were able to support interesting ideas.

Gregg Kvistad: [18:23](#)

You know Jim and you know this very, very well, this was a period of, of university growth in so many different ways. One of those was in our infrastructure. One of the things that, that Dan made very clear is that space matters, buildings matter. And for your typical faculty member, that was frequently something that you had to convince them of, except when you ask them about their office, how did they view like you have to, so we were doing a lot of building at that time and we received this very generous gift from Don and Sue Sturm to renovate what is now Sturm hall, which is the main building of arts, humanities and social sciences where the business school used to be located. And I became what was nominally as Dean's work named during these building projects. Normally the owner of that building, which scared the devil out of me, I had no idea what that meant.

Gregg Kvistad: [19:28](#)

What it meant was learning how to help manage a construction project by working with faculty and their dreams and being responsible to donors and understanding very clearly the decisions that you are making are going to have an impact for the next 30 or 40 years. And that was a very interesting, very time consuming process that was then amplified when we decided to move the music school back to the main

campus. And we built the Bob, Robert and Judy Newman center for performing arts. I was involved in that project as well, yet it was a part of this effort to really transform the physical space at the university and the impact that that had on all of us on students, on faculty, on staff. We still feel it today. This is a bit of a sanctuary that we are in and we are taking care of that. Every one of us who grew up in the, grew up who were here, I guess we kind of grew up in the Dan Ritchie days. We cannot walk by a piece of trash on the sidewalk without picking it up. It's just part of the DNA. And that's a good thing. So that was another part of my job as dean and I surprisingly I learned a lot and enjoyed it.

Jim Griesemer: [21:07](#)

Okay. Well you did a, you were very successful as, as, as dean of the college and a well, and then as we say in academia, no good deed goes unpunished. And having, having been dean, you were probably looking forward to going back to Germany for more study. But fate interceded tell us about that.

Gregg Kvistad: [21:33](#)

So Dan Ritchie stepped down from the chancellor's position. And we had a search for a chancellor and Bob Coombe, who was the provost who was previously my colleague as Dean became chancellor. And he spoke to the other deans. And he asked than what they thought. And I was named interim provost while when Bob assumed the position of chancellor for a year. And as in no good deed goes unpunished interims. The other aphorism is you don't stand still as an interim. So I spent the literally the first three months, four hours a day with the director of budget and planning, studying the finances of the 47 different responsibility centers that we have at the university. I had some idea vaguely of the complexity. I did not know, obviously, the details of it.

Gregg Kvistad: [22:43](#)

And that was at the time, probably the foremost responsibility for the provost. In our system, the provost, um develops the university's budget. It's monitored by the by the CFO, by the, the vice chancellor. And it was a very, very serious endeavor that I was about to embark. And I had no idea if I was going to get the position. But I thought, well, this is interesting in and of itself. I'm learning something no matter what happens, there was a search, there was a



national search and people were brought in and that provided its own interesting stress. And I was asked to then become the provost and I gladly did that. And then worked with Bob Coombe, as chancellor and most closely with Craig woody as the chief financial officer.

Jim Griesemer: [23:43](#)

Well, we, I indicated the beginning that, that we think of this story, this renaissance and sort of as a sort of a three part story the very desperate fiscal problems. And you arrived just in time for those the turnaround. And then this period, a decade long period of renewal, almost rebirth of the university. And that much of that time coincides with your role as provost, the chief academic officer and executive vice chancellor. A great many things happened during that period. And, and you, um either led them or supported them or encouraged them. What are, as you look back on that, which wasn't so long ago what are some of the things that you think about that you think may have have a transcending value perhaps?

Gregg Kvistad: [24:49](#)

It, it was an interesting time because what we had was the next chapter. I think you just, you just described that Jim, the next chapter in the university's revival. And now we were, we felt that we had a pretty good foundation in terms of financial systems budget, um in terms of the ethos of how important those matters are for university, for everyone to understand at some level. So now what, what should we do now? And I worked very closely with Bob comb as chancellor, and we really decided that now is the time to invest in the faculty in a substantial way in terms of, of both salaries, which we were frankly not competitive with the institutions that our candidates were getting offers from or at least interviews at. And so we tried to bump those up and we did.

Gregg Kvistad: [26:05](#)

And we also expanded the, the, the faculty during this period. We saw that as a a good investment. And there are some, there are some seriously I, I think well-founded data that suggests that the investment in faculty at a university is one of the most important things you can do, especially if there there are some deficits in terms of, of numbers of folks and also in terms of salary. So we did that and it was a gradual process and you have to be extremely careful in that because as you know, with the tenure system, you are

making some pretty major decisions that have you know, 30, 40 year impacts for a university. And I think we did a pretty good job of that. The deans obviously were, were most instrumental in that. We also were concerned about keeping overhead low at the university.

Gregg Kvistad: [27:11](#)

And overhead. I guess I saw myself as overhead as provost. You know, that's, you know, that's not exactly true, but I think it's a good kind of idea to kind of keep it that mindset. It, those who does of us who are staff and administrators are here for our students and the most immediate folks who interact with students, our faculty. So we, we kept things pretty tight on the, on the staff side. We did some work with staff salaries as well, but the idea was to really to invest in the academic enterprise. And we did that well. I think as I look back there, I think there were some mistakes that that we made or if not mistakes, things that we maybe should have given a little bit more, um credence to. And I remember Jim in, in our deans meetings, one of the things that you kept talking about was our marketing budget, which was always modest at the university. And frankly, it stayed pretty modest when I was provost. I think we got it done a little bit more there. I think we also under invested in the advancement area of the university. Part of that had to do with where we were coming out of Dan Ritchie. So I think that those were things that we should have done some work on that we didn't.

Jim Griesemer: [28:44](#)

Well taken as a whole, however, I think that that under your leadership the university's progress at that period of time was, was truly remarkable. You and Bob, in a sense, we're in a harness together leading the leading the institution. Are there other things that you think about as you look back? And again, it's not ancient history by any means, but as you look back that that you, that you feel good about and, and that you had a chance either to initiate or to support.

Gregg Kvistad: [29:25](#)

I think what was most important was to was institution-wide to implement and institutionalized, if you will, some of these values that we that, that the university was, was frankly introduced to by Dan Ritchie in, in the 1980's. And, and I think we were able to do that. We, we, we lived those values as, as administrators. There was always a concern about

resources. The university is 70% for its revenue, tuition dependent. That's relatively high even for institutions that are a lot like us. And what that means is that you've got to be very, very mindful of the investments that you make and the best investments that you make. And we're, we're doing this in one of those, one of those investments, this Anderson Academic Commons, which was an investment in the student experience at the university and the research experience for faculty. It was an extraordinary project that had so many different people who were brought together to move this thing forward.

Gregg Kvistad: [30:58](#)

And I think that's what we tried to do in those years. We, we felt as though we could make some, some pretty bold moves, but we also felt that we needed the resources to do that. And we felt that in order to do that, there needed to be a good amount of shared governance with faculty and stakeholders. And certainly including the generous donors who were so much part of the renaissance of the university. We were all part of this. And it was an interesting type of community that I never thought that I would find myself in because I liked reading books and writing things and teaching students. So it was, it was a, it was a fun, sometimes stressful, extraordinarily busy time. But I enjoyed it and I think, you know, I'm glad I had that opportunity to serve the university.

Jim Griesemer: [32:01](#)

Well, we've only touched on the many things that occurred during your, your tenure as our provost and the leadership that you played. I guess I'm interested in one other thing as, as provost and, and as Dean as well. There are lots of decisions that you have to make, lots lots of issues coming at you. The buck really does stop at your desk. Beyond the instant question, what were the, what were the values? What were the principles that guided you as you thought about these questions? Not just singularly, but across, across the, the horizon.

Gregg Kvistad: [32:49](#)

You're right, these are, these are positions that sometimes are are challenging in ways that you are you are not trained for in any capacity. Whether that's a PhD in political science or, or anything else. And so you do, you do need to reach back to values that are certainly partly personal, but they've got to be appropriate for the institution and for the context in

which you're working. I think one of the strongest values for me that ran throughout all of these service positions that I've had at the university is the respect for accountability. That we are we are actors. We are making decisions that have an impact on people in an institution, sometimes for decades. And the responsibility to be accountable for those decisions I thought was, was really very, very important.

Gregg Kvistad: [33:56](#)

And I tried when I interacted with faculty and Deans and sometimes in the most some of the most difficult human resources issues that one deals with in these positions. I tried to stress that, that we are members. We are part of a university. This organization is larger than we are. We are here as stewards of this organization, even as a faculty member or as a staff member and you are accountable for your actions, not just today and tomorrow, but what does this mean 10 and 15 years from now? That was one. There was another one that sounds a little harsh, but I, I tried to embody it. Just no excuses, reasons maybe, but not excuses. There were things that that were hard to do and we made mistakes. And it's important to acknowledge those mistakes. I can point to dozens of those.

Gregg Kvistad: [35:02](#)

In fact, one, as we were walking into this room, Jim, I remember one of the decisions we made about this library building was that we would store a large number of the library book volumes off site and I didn't properly engage the faculty on that. And, and I thought, okay, shared governance one-o-one you're moving books from their access. So we unwound that and spent the next year and a half working with the faculty committee. But that they had a point and they are, they are really important members of this community. So accountability no excuses, explanations have a respect for shared governance. And, and finally, the last one is that, and this is not going to be too eloquently stated, it's not about you as a leader. It's about the institution. This, I happen to serve in these positions well before, well, we were barely branding universities.

Gregg Kvistad: [36:15](#)

We should have been doing that a long time ago, but we weren't branding ourselves as leaders. That really wasn't the deal. The deal was show up to work, do your job, make sure you're, you're doing it as well as possible.

In that I think that ethos is a good one and we still have it at the university. Every one of the current leaders are absolutely there as well. But I think that's a really, really important value for those of us connected to an extraordinary institution like the University of Denver.

Jim Griesemer:

[36:52](#)

Well, Greg, your contributions are very significant and I want to thank you for sharing your perspective and, and indeed your history with, with us drawn from the role that you played, which really helped transform the University of Denver. I hope you will join us in the future as we continue the story of the University of Denver's remarkable renaissance. I'm Jim Griesemer. Thank you for watching.