

**Rob Knapp**  
**Interviewed by Barbara Leigh Smith**  
**The Evergreen State College oral history project**  
**October 30, 2018**  
**FINAL**

**Smith:** This is Barbara Smith and I'm interviewing Rob Knapp today [October 30, 2018]. The first section is really about childhood and growing up and the impact that might have had on your subsequently coming to Evergreen, and your interest in certain things. Talk a little bit about that.

**Knapp:** Maybe what's relevant to you. I came from a Northeastern pair of families, old Boston and upstate New York business. Those were the two branches. There was money. There's all sorts of stuff about how it was actually done, but that plus going to one of the very, very good Eastern prep schools, which I loved being in, meant that I came out of school and applied for jobs with just a lot of confidence that the world would probably work out fine. I don't know how much of that is temperament and how much of that is background. It's not relevant to try to . . .

**Smith:** Very hard to sort out.

**Knapp:** But it doesn't need to be explained. It meant that, unlike almost everybody in my Eastern boarding school, I went into the sciences and actually into physics. I think I'm one of only three graduates of Groton School ever that went into physics.

That was very exciting and interesting, and it may be relevant to me at Evergreen. It's just that it felt very much like, sure, things might be difficult but they are probably possible and it will be interesting to look into them and explore them and see where they went. Physicists even joke about how the training makes you think, oh, give me a week or two and I can probably do it—whatever it is.  
[laughter]

**Smith:** A little like engineers.

**Knapp:** No, engineers are trained to be extremely cautious because they get sued and things like that. The guy who designed the Tacoma Narrows Bridge that fell down had his career ended, basically. In physics, if I made a big public mistake my career would also not go far. But physicists expect each other to get out beyond what is known for sure. You don't get points for doing a good job at something that has already been done before. So you get practice at figuring things out, and that gives you a certain cockiness which can be irritating but is often productive—"I could figure it out, it can't be that hard."

It's a joke and I don't want to take it too far, but there's a feeling of that sort that's given me a lot of confidence.

**Smith:** Was that part of the big resurgence of the sciences in the '60s and '70s and back to the '50s?

**Knapp:** Physics was the lead science during the late '40s and the '50s, until DNA came along. I was at the tail end of that, and I'm sure I was partly responding to how the wind was blowing. Also the Northeastern background meant that I was used to being in the presence of old things without taking them too seriously, but liking them, valuing tradition, that kind of stuff. And having it be sort of under the skin so that I wasn't thinking about it very much. It was just there.

As I went through graduate school, I found I was taking up chances to teach more and more. And in my research life, which is what graduate students in physics are supposed to concentrate on, I only wanted to work on the hardest problems. I wasn't having the right ideas it takes to do anything with the hardest problems, so my research was not particularly going anywhere. Without really noticing it, I was just doing more and more teaching. I don't think I was good at even noticing that people were giving me advice about what I should spend my time on.

I finished graduate school, then had a post-doc for two years at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh and then it came time to actually get a job. That was a job crunch time in physics. Most of the people that had gone into graduate study when it was the best thing since sliced bread discovered that like sliced bread, you could produce an awful lot of it in a short time. So, physics Ph.D.'s were driving taxis and what kind of a job was I going to get?

It turned out to be a job at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, one of the second-tier California universities but one that was mainly about teaching and not about anything else. That was fine by me. I got a leave replacement job. I was there for a year, got married. Helena joined me in California for the second year and sometime in early fall, I heard about this weird new place that was starting—Evergreen in Washington. Got a hold of the first catalog and we both thought, well, we should just go and call on them. So, we invited ourselves for an interview. It was a crazy time. There was lots of action and procedures weren't formalized. Somehow there was confidence in the notion "just do what presents itself to be done" and we didn't worry at all about who was paying. We just went on up.

**Smith:** Was this before it actually opened in the planning year?

**Knapp:** This was year one of classes. We showed up in late October.

**Smith:** Beginning of the year, really.

**Knapp:** The Library Building had been just begun being used. It hadn't been finished when classes began that first year, but by the time we came it was open and in use, though as I remember there wasn't yet much furniture in many of the rooms.

It was dark and rainy and so we didn't have any sense of what the area was like—we just drove from the airport with our heads down. We found the campus, there were places to park, but I don't remember much except the place being a construction site. The place academically was being run by “the deans” at that time—Merv Cadwallader and Don Humphrey and Charlie Teske. Somehow, they'd arranged for me to sit down with some people, which, looking back, included Byron Youtz. I don't actually remember who else.

We talked to some people, split up and watched some classes being taught, and went away again. It was certainly interesting, full of the excitement of making something new.

It has to be said that Helena wrote at the same time, in the same envelope to Evergreen saying that she wanted to come to look into possibilities, just as I did. By the time we got to Evergreen, her letter had gotten lost. That was the beginning of her experience at Evergreen, which was a lot rockier than mine. Nobody was being very careful about gender stuff at that time, or for a good many years afterward, it has to be said.

I got a job offer, after writing a piece about teaching ideas and after a visit from Merv to us in California, and we decided to come. [chuckles] The thing I remember most that seems relevant about getting started was the gathering that fall—this was the faculty of year two, the first year people and all the new people in year two.

**Smith:** Which was a huge group, wasn't it?

**Knapp:** Yes. The first year had been 50. The second year was another 50. All 100 of us, more or less, got together in the ground floor of the Activities Building for our first meeting. The thing I remember is that various people spoke including the deans, and then there was discussion, during which a number of the first-year faculty spoke up about things that had been done wrong.

Merv Cadwallader was already the magnet figure for people's attention. The other two deans worked hard and did stuff, but he was the magnet. Anyway, there was this various crisscross critical stuff mentioning Merv by name fairly often.

**Smith:** Yes.

**Knapp:** Then this voice from the back spoke up and it was Maxine [Mimms], who was new.

**Smith:** Oh! [laughing]

**Knapp:** She came the same year I did. She said something to the effect of “This is all very well but we’d like to learn how to dislike Merv our own way.” [laughter]

It definitely was sort of a Year Two —lots of stuff was unresolved. But there I was at Evergreen with this background in physics, theoretical physics, and two years of teaching experience at a second-tier California place. At that place I was thinking, this is fine and the kids are nice, but both they and the university have extremely narrow and limited goals. They have come to be told what to do in order to succeed at fairly straightforward conventional things, and this is a place with extremely conventional organization of required courses and distributions and all that kind of thing. It was set up to not have the boats rocked very much at all. If you’re in physics in a place like that you’re teaching required courses.

**Smith:** All sequenced.

**Knapp:** All sequenced and lots of the students are taking Introductory physics because they have to, and lots of the physics department is about how to make sure the courses go on being required because that’s where the jobs come from. One of the big audiences in the department—

**Smith:** Whoops! Wait a minute.

**Knapp:** One of the big audiences in the required classes were architects because Cal Poly had a really big architecture school doing very pedestrian, straight-ahead architecture, architecture that needs to be done because someone’s got to put ordinary buildings together, and this place was turning out lots of architects who did that. They were all required to take three semesters of physics, which they hated, and which it turned out the Architecture Department made no specific use of whatsoever. It was entirely used as for weeding people out.

**Smith:** Kind of like the way calculus became used.

**Knapp:** Exactly, same sort of deal. Or course, it was the ‘60s and there was this critical mood going around about colleges and lots of complaining about yellowed lecture notes and all the stuff that was behind what got Evergreen interested in innovation.

I thought, I guess somewhere in the middle of my first year, well, we could take one of these semesters and do something different. In the last semester, instead of more electromagnetism there could be a course that was just for architects. It would still be required, but it could have architectural topics.

**Smith:** Applied context.

**Knapp:** Exactly. That was okay. As is often the case in conventional places that if someone has a bright idea, they often say, “Oh, sure, go for it as long as you want. When you’re done, it goes away.”

So, I cooked one up. The first run was going to be in the second half of my second year, when the connection with Evergreen was alive. I was doing the background research. For architects, one thing in California is earthquakes. Let’s talk about earthquakes. I was working up a lecture and wanted a chart with that showed the vibrations in an earthquake, a seismogram kind of thing. Here was this book and here was a lovely chart with these enormous big swings on it, just what I needed for the class, really clear and so forth. The little caption at the bottom said: “Olympia, Washington 1947.” [laughter] That’s where I’m going! So, that got me here with a little bit of let’s-try-it-out attitude.

Then I went into a first-year six-person team called Human Ecology. It was a sort of mixed team. Dave Milne was on it. Some people that you’d met and knew. Gil Salcedo.

**Smith:** Yes, I knew Gil.

**Knapp:** He was on that team. And Jeff Kelly. Then some people who left fairly soon after that. There was a lawyer named Richard Anderson, who had been around in the first year, I think, but left after this one.

**Smith:** I didn’t know him.

**Knapp:** And a young black woman named Ida Daum, an anthropologist. Later on she left I think not for direct harassment reasons at all, but because being a politically aware black woman in The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington in 1972 meant you were very lonely.

**Smith:** Yes, you only had Maxine.

**Knapp:** You had Maxine and Rudy and so forth, but her life and action was back in the East and she went and did it. I don’t think it turned out very well for her, I’m afraid. I was lucky to teach with her.

So, that was the team. Human Ecology. We did various things and had some community action. Then in the spring of that year—like a lot of Evergreen programs at the time, there was discontent in the winter. I got my first practice at working with students being discontented with programs. That was a thing that I actually had, I think, quite a good instinct about how to handle.

**Smith:** What did you do?

**Knapp:** We had a meeting and I began to do my notetaking thing. I always tended to be at the blackboard writing things down. I think unconsciously I recognized what that was about, and there’s

now a name for it. Collaborative display. The meeting was “you tell us all the things that are on your mind”—and it was the whole program, not just the most vocal or unhappy students but the whole group of students all there—and I would write it all down. That’s doing the thing you recognize.

**Smith:** The debrief.

**Knapp:** It’s making sure people can feel that they’ve been heard because you’ve taken the trouble to get their words on the blackboard.

**Smith:** How many students were there?

**Knapp:** There were 120 students.

**Smith:** Oh my gosh! Big.

**Knapp:** It was a very big program. We had a long session of writing this stuff down. We had said, “We’re going to write this all down and then we’re going to away overnight and come back tomorrow and tell you what we want to do in relation to what you’ve told us.” We were fairly careful about the language. I don’t think every team was but I think we were.

**Smith:** Was this practice done across programs then?

**Knapp:** No. Evergreen was founded on negatives—“We aren’t going to do this, we aren’t going to do that.” It wasn’t until the 1998 self-study that Matt Smith changed these to positive descriptions.

**Smith:** Right, no this, no that.

**Knapp:** So, fine, you’re not doing this, that and the other, but what are you going to do? Well, we started the college and then figured it out sort of step by step. It was fairly common for programs to have upsets and it was not uncommon to say, “Okay, we’re going to call things to a halt. We’ll just sit down and talk process. We’re going to work on it.” So I’m talking about what we happened to do of this kind in Human Ecology that year.

I think that approach does what’s needed in that situation, which is, (A) genuinely listening to what’s not working for people; and (B) holding onto the authority that everybody wants the instructors to have—the instructors want it and the students want authority to be exercised. They know that they’re not the experts but they don’t want just any old authority, not authority free floating. When you come back, if it sounds you actually have taken on board what got said and you’ve proposed some changes and reminded people what we’re generally after and not been defensive about the whole game, people say, “Okay, let’s go forward.”

One of the things we went forward with was to have the spring quarter—and this became a classic Evergreen thing—we’ve established some lines of development and some basics, now we’re going to have projects and special interest work. In the full-time program it’s so natural to move from doing all stuff together to needing to recognize and wanting to recognize that people aren’t after the same things, and shouldn’t all be doing exactly the same stuff till mid-June.

**Smith:** Especially in a large group like that.

**Knapp:** Especially in a giant group. There were special interest groups, and one of the special interest groups for the spring was going to be Alternative Lifestyles, which none of my colleagues wanted to do. We knew the students. It was going to be the hippiest of the hippies and all that kind of thing.

I said, “Okay, I’ll do it. But I have one condition.” [The students] had clustered and they knew who they were. I sat down with them and said, “I’m ready to read about Native American lifestyle and all this kind of stuff, but you have to agree to an experience of a lifestyle I’m sure is alternative to all of you, namely to have a formal black-tie dinner party.” They said, “Okay,” because they had the same sort of readiness to give things a try.

I spent some time scrounging around the faculty to get enough black ties for all the men students, and the women students had their prom dresses. The [Oscar] Soules had a house and the china and so forth, and Dave Milne agreed to be the butler. I explained to them, “Here’s what you do. This is a lifestyle that has a shape to it, in the same way that you need to expect that Native American lifestyle has things you do and things you don’t do. Here’s an example I know a lot about because that’s how I grew up.”

We all gathered together with due preparation. It was done in a potluck fashion—they all brought food—but it was taken into the kitchen where Milne, the butler, had the job of assembling it and bringing it to the table. It was very illuminating for everyone, specifically that we all sat down—it was a group of about a dozen or 14, so we fit around a big dining room table. It was all nicely laid out and the candles were lit, and when Milne, the butler, showed up the first time, a bunch of people giggled a little bit. But I’d instructed them that really that was not—

**Smith:** Not appropriate.

**Knapp:** That the help were there to be invisible and to just provide things. And just by itself, the second time he showed up they didn’t notice at all. The roles had really . . .

**Smith:** . . . sunk in.

**Knapp:** It wasn't so much their conscious effort, it was just there you are sitting and you're talking and it's in this environment. Something is happening outside your field of view. It just was very natural. The whole social setting had its own logic that people settled into. In some ways that was the high point of the year for me. [laughter]

**Smith:** Did you then debrief all that?

**Knapp:** Oh, yes. We sat around at the end and the next day talked about it some more and what their reactions were.

**Smith:** Were the other lifestyles explored? I take it each student had one, or the group?

**Knapp:** We agreed as a group before the quarter began that we were going to do this reading and that reading. Probably downstairs in my notes I know what they were. I know that there were Southwest Pueblo Indians. I don't remember what the others were but I think there were three or four things that we spent time on in a reading-seminar-research kind of way. It was very informal and not really product oriented.

In terms of my own teaching, I didn't yet understand how important having a good final product really was. That was the thing that I came to in the end for lots of my stuff, that whatever else you're doing—and really regardless of the goals—there should be something that it leads up to, and ideally something whose importance is larger than just you and the instructor. Lots of teaching has done this by having a term paper or a giant final exam. The trouble with that— Well, it's not all trouble. There is some work that that definitely does. But the trouble is what you're doing is not work for the world. it's just work for the instructor. In terms of you as a student—your motivation and your sense of having got somewhere and so forth—it's far better if it's work that gets out into the world.

One of the reasons that I really responded to design studies and began being so interested in working with people like Bob Leverich and having a studio as the center was that design is a whole tradition about how the work that you produce is going to be on show and available for everybody. Over the years, that came to seem more and more and more important.

But for this workshop back in my first year, we just did it. Everyone went away pretty happy. Evergreen was a fair jumble at that point and it wasn't working for literally everybody. I think our turnover in terms of percentage of people staying was not so great, in U.S. college terms. I don't think it was much better or worse than it is now. Those numbers haven't changed that much.

**Smith:** Except changes in the length of programs, I think, gave people more doors later .



**Knapp:** Right, and that's one of the downsides of the more options.

What should we do next?

**Smith:** That was your beginning program.

**Knapp:** I have a detailed resume of my teaching career I'll get for you. [[shows it]]

**Smith:** Did you create that just for this?

**Knapp:** No.

**Smith:** Wow! Look at this.

**Knapp:** My career is Evergreen teaching, so if I'm describing it to someone, I'd better tell them what I did. One of the amusing end products of all of this was I had this background in physics [and] I eventually got a big fellowship from the Social Science Research Council. This was what got me to Japan the third and fourth times. It was for studying the design process for green buildings in Japan. What qualified me to do this? Basically, the range of things I'd been involved in at Evergreen. It added up to enough that I could be doing social science, at least well enough for the Social Science Research Council. It was qualitative and it was blah blah blah, but it was the real thing. The deaning went into that and the interdisciplinary stuff and team teaching and everything.

**Smith:** You gave me a really good sense of how and why you came here, and the first program and some of the lessons there. But what was Evergreen like then besides not a lot of rules and very open? What was the atmosphere like?

**Knapp:** The atmosphere was very passionate and very eclectic. Evergreen was never a place with a single vision at work and a single agenda. Everybody says in a rather thoughtless way, "Well, of course, you can't get anything really started unless you really know what you're doing." Well, no. That's not so. [laughter] In fact, being eclectic has been a strength for the college, I think, although terribly irritating to almost everybody all the time.

I gave a talk once at Evergreen. This was in maybe sometime in the mid-'80s. I found myself saying, "Evergreen faculty are like New York taxi drivers." At that time they were this set of characters, all born and bred in New York. You'd drive around with them and they would tell you everything that was wrong with the city as they drove around, unless you started criticizing the city yourself, in which case they were very fierce about what a great place it was. We were like that.

The planning faculty had taken Merv's idea about thematic interdisciplinary study and run further with it than he wanted.

**Smith:** Yes.

**Knapp:** And made it “This is what we do.” We were in the stages of a thing that hasn’t ended, which is, how do you do that—thematic interdisciplinary study—and hang onto its vibrancy and its relevance, and also build up people’s backgrounds and skills?

**Smith:** And get enough students.

**Knapp:** And get enough students. There’s been a sort of dialectic about that all the way along. I think that with only tiny bits of word changes, you could take documents from back then about student numbers and Evergreen programs and use them now.

**End Part 2 ZOOM0004**

**Begin Part 3 ZOOM0005**

**Smith:** We were talking about kind of the atmosphere.

**Knapp:** People had come to make a place that was really new, but they’d come with a bunch of different agendas about what that should be.

**Smith:** Some had previous experience elsewhere, too.

**Knapp:** Yeah, there was a bunch of people from Old Westbury, Byron as the most notable but not the only figure. Several people had come from there.

**Smith:** Then there were clusters from Reed and Oberlin.

**Knapp:** Reed, Oberlin, Buffalo.

**Smith:** Hitchens was down at Rollins?

**Knapp:** In terms of clusters, the ones that I remember are Reed, Oberlin, some people from San Jose, some people from SUNY Buffalo and Old Westbury. Then there were scattered people from here, there, wherever. There were a lot of remarkable people, people with lots of presence and lots of imagination, and they all were going in different directions. [chuckles] There was a lot of passion and a sense that if we didn’t do the right things, Evergreen would probably fall apart, and at any one moment some bunch of people thought we really weren’t doing the right things and everything was in fact falling apart.

Part of what I came to with the sense of ongoing crisis over time was Evergreen is always falling apart, and the question is not about that but about “Who’s got the energy and the imagination to go to whatever the next step is?”

We had Tom Rainey being very eloquently and fervently Marxist in a historian's kind of way. We had Steve Herman and the natural history people doing their kind of stuff. We had Rudy Martin and his unflappable determined kind of way. We had some more raucous people of color. We had Mary Nelson and Mary Hillaire, I think arriving the same year. I'm pretty sure both of them came that year.

**Smith:** And Maxine! [laughing]

**Knapp:** And Maxine, who was on campus at that point. She started Tacoma shortly after that. And there were people like Mark Levinsky and Peter Elbow who were quite something, and all kind of different from each other. So, there was lots of contention and lots of handwringing and lots of discussion about, what should we do? And then DTFs would get started to come back with ideas and we would try them or not try them or whatever.

**Smith:** Merv was arguing that this model should only apply to the lower division?

**Knapp:** Only part of the college or only the lower division.

**Smith:** People rejected that eventually, but is that why he left, and was that a widely discussed alternative?

**Knapp:** No. Different people will probably see it differently. It didn't feel to me as though it was ever widely discussed or had much chance as a proposal. He brought in this thematic interdisciplinary idea and found people latched onto it. I think in the first year he said, "Let's just see what happens," and then began to think, no, it's got shortcomings that can't—he thought—can't be got around.

But then everybody else thought—everybody, I mean enough other people thought "You're talking about returning us to a conventional model." One of the productive parts about having said so many "noes" to everything was that it was going to be very hard for us to return to a conventional model without violating a bunch of the things we said we wouldn't do.

**Smith:** Absolutely. And lots of the schools that did do that hybrid thing lost the innovation eventually.

**Knapp:** Yes, for obvious reasons.

Merv ran a kind of cult of personality, I think one would have to say, cultivating people. He was fairly charismatic, so a certain bunch clustered around him and talked about the thing that he was most actively promoting and was having the biggest impact at the beginning—one of the tag phrases was "Athens in America." One of the ways we were going to bring together what liberal arts colleges do and what needs to happen now was a curriculum about democracy. Then there were things that spun off

from that, looking kind of different but really out of the same thing. “The personal is political” was another tag phrase. There was an autobiography program, for example.

**Smith:** He was kind of a content leader not just a structure leader.

**Knapp:** Oh, yes, a content leader and didn’t have anything to do with the sciences. The dean that related to the science content was Don Humphrey, who was very hardworking but much more conventional-minded kind of guy. Do you know him at all?

**Smith:** Yes. He was here still when I came.

**Knapp:** Frankly, in the very earliest going, there wasn’t a lot of really solid science content in the first year or two. Then Byron, I think, was the one who said, “No, we’re going to have to have some background building for sciences, so we need to have a coordinated studies program that does that.” I was the person that came up with the name for it, although I didn’t teach in it. It was called Matter and Motion for years and years, which is the name of a book by [James Clerk] Maxwell, the great physicist. It was going to be physics, chemistry and calculus all together. That was how that background was going to be built.

Quite early on in my teaching, I did two things a bit scattered in time. I did this Political Ecology, Human Ecology kind of stuff and then I did a basic physics and math teaching, first in an advanced group contract, just me and eight or 10 students who were ready to do junior-level stuff, and I was just about ready to do junior-level stuff. [laughter] There’s that old joke about “Have you read so and so’s book?” “Hell, no. I haven’t even taught it yet.” [laughter]

So, the science stuff began to build up and Byron and Fred Tabbutt were the leaders on the science side on that. I think Jeanne Hahn was in a program they started with. That was before Matter and Motion, that was . . . the name may come back to me but it was a thing about understanding nature and there was a strong science side.

**Smith:** Political Ecology or something like that?

**Knapp:** Yes, except it wasn’t environmentally oriented. Then there was this soft psychology side to the college in the hands of people like Bill Aldridge. Quite a lot of the contention was about whether the hardnosed people were being hardnosed in that insufferable old way, and whether the soft-nosed people were being soft-nosed with their usual appalling lack of rigor.

**Smith:** Where was quality?

**Knapp:** “Where was quality”—that kind of stuff. And Rudy Martin and David Marr wrote . . .

**Smith:** . . . the M 'n M Manifesto.

**Knapp:** Right, in the first year.

**Smith:** So, that came out of that divide.

**Knapp:** Already in the first year, the divide was there.

**End Part 3 ZOOM0005**

**Begin Part 4 ZOOM0006**

**Knapp:** The faculty styles were different enough so that from the start, one bit of what people talked about was who ought to be fired, and why didn't Evergreen ever fire anybody? That itself has its own baggage about the tough guy approach to life which says, well, if you haven't fired someone, you aren't a real person. That's nutty but it's out there. You've seen that, heard people talk that way.

**Smith:** Yes. So, this whole thing extended to the teachers as well as the content and approaches in the classroom.

**Knapp:** Oh, yeah. Part of the passion was we were small enough and getting together all the time about things, so everything was personalized. I remember one meeting after year three or four—this went on for a while—a particular moment when my sense of how things were took a good turn for the healthy.

Tom Rainey got up and made some objection to something or other, and I for the first time found myself thinking, ah, that's Tom doing what he does. He's done it before, he'll do it again and I'll probably do what I do and probably we'll be okay.

**Smith:** You were learning to live with all the complexity.

**Knapp:** Yes, and I think learning to live with these very visible contentions is not a bad place to be. I don't think as the college has gone on that people have been ready to do that enough.

**Smith:** I think that's right. I think there was a tolerance for deviance. One of my other interviews talked about how Paul Sparks was one of those outliers.

**Knapp:** Right.

**Smith:** And yet he was accepted and he contributed.

**Knapp:** He contributed and he did his stuff and it was pretty outrageous from time to time.

**Smith:** There were a lot of people like that.

**Knapp:** Probably if you went around you would find that most people had someone they regarded that way.

**Smith:** Yes.

**Knapp:** Even to the point of wishing they weren't there but knowing that they were, and that was how it was going to be.

**Smith:** What were some of the other critical issues you remember from that first five years or six years?

**Knapp:** Well, the pathways question came up. The key thing there was the first Long Range Curriculum DTF, which happened in '75, I think. I was the person who wrote the report, which, in my sort of sure-this-can-all-work kind of way, said, "Well, we can have interdisciplinary areas" . . . I forget what they were called but basically specialty areas . . . "and we can have beginning and advanced work. All we have to do is for the areas to provide pathways, in effect. I mean, that's the current term, and I think I remember a diagram that shows sort of how this would happen.

**Smith:** Yeah, I think you were doing that because of accreditation thing was that period, too.

**Knapp:** Well, maybe, but there was also that I was just—you probably know Leslie Owen, the student.

**Smith:** No.

**Knapp:** Well, she was a student from that time who has stayed in Olympia and is a lawyer. For example, on the Return to Evergreen, what was Evergreen like for students? They had a panel about what it was like in the first years. She was on the panel, partly because she was involved in organizing a giant teach-in in something like 1975. A teach-in consisted of academic operations coming to a halt for two days, and there being multiple discussion groups and mass meetings and all this kind of stuff. I have a picture of one of the mass meetings, which is the most un-flamboyant, not exactly decorous but sort of quietly behaved thing you can imagine, and people were talking about redesigning the college. They were talking about radical things.

**Smith:** Pretty different from now, huh?

**Knapp:** Well, different from everybody's image. I mean, there was plenty of that going on all over in the '60s about placards and blah blah blah. And here we all are in the old Library lobby with its staircase, and everybody's sort of sitting there.

**Smith:** I've seen that picture. [laughing]

**Knapp:** This is dispute and demonstration and disruption at Evergreen State College. People quietly sitting and listening. Anyway, she was involved with this. From the student side there was enough

discontent about what it was all going to add up to to mean there was a lot of impulse there, plus faculty concerns about it. The accreditation may have got added in, but it wasn't animating the thing.

There was then this Long-Range DTF which talked its way through the issues and was reasonable about it. And I wrote a reasonable report, of course, at least that's what I think it was. Then I went into my first round in the deanship in what was then called assistant dean.

**Smith:** That's when I came. [laughing]

**Knapp:** And basically I was the Curriculum Dean.

**Smith:** Right.

**Knapp:** You remember Will Humphreys?

**Smith:** Oh, yes.

**Knapp:** He was also this guy who roused lots of opposition because of how he was. I think he wasn't a bad guy but I think his manner was like that.

**Smith:** Very bright, though, too.

**Knapp:** Very bright, very thoughtful, concerned, and impatient with waffling and fluttering. He was a philosopher. But, of course, waffling was part of what we needed to do because we weren't going to resolve our contradictions. This is my mature take on things. [laughter]

**Smith:** I still remember that that first year, Bill Winden was there, too.

**Knapp:** Yeah.

**Smith:** Half of the faculty evaluations were not turned in. [laughing] There was some measures that needed to be taken just to get the work done.

**Knapp:** Absolutely. On that front, having spent a career at Evergreen and being deeply engaged with the place in all sorts of ways, I really do think that at any one moment from then until now there's big, big work that needs to be done, which isn't easy to do and not everybody wants it to be done. We've been through endless rounds of that but that's what it takes, I think, to do this carrying forward without resolving the contradictions entirely; that you're going to set up something which deals with the present issue—gets the evaluations written or whatever—but it's going to have some loopholes or the seeds of future difficulty are going to be there. The only way to avoid the future difficulty is to lock down the system, and then it can't do the thing it really needs to do.

**Smith:** Then you've lost it really.

**Knapp:** Yes, then you've lost it. So, there was that.

**Smith:** Why did you become a dean?

**Knapp:** I don't know. Well, I know part of it, which was from the beginning I had this clarity that the structures of the place have everything to do with what's possible in the classroom. So one needs to take a lot of trouble over the structures—I mean things like registration and forming teams and scheduling and narrative evaluations and all that—to keep the possibilities open for the right things to happen in the classroom.

**End Part 4 ZOOM0006**

**Begin Part 5 ZOOM0007**

**Knapp:** Originally the deans did a lot of forming the curriculum each year. There was a big board in Merv's office with faculty names on 3x5 cards. The exercise was to get everyone on a good team offering a lively, needed program. But that didn't last. People got impatient with Merv's willingness and interest in running the show.

**Smith:** Prescriptive.

**Knapp:** Or feeling that too much of that was happening, or not feeling that they were able to get what they needed and wanted in the kinds of discourse that we had. Whatever the reasons were, things began to shift more toward faculty making the proposals, but it was still, when I was in the deanship for that round—'76 to '79 or whatever it was—the deans were still able to take quite an activist role. "Here's a hole in the curriculum. Let's get so-and-so together with so-and-so." "You'd be good for this team. Can I get you to join?" "We need somebody to teach X." That kind of thing.

**Smith:** That was reinforced by the annual evaluations, in my experience.

**Knapp:** Sure.

**Smith:** Because that was the time to consult with them and encourage and recruit.

**Knapp:** Right. The evaluation was really much more a real sit-down with someone and their teaching and so forth and not so much whether the bosses were telling you if you'd done a good job.

**Smith:** No. I remember acutely you taking me to my first evaluation conference. There was tea served and cookies and it was a validation and an intellectual discovery process and sharing.

**Knapp:** Yeah. One constant thing, which I think Evergreen has steadily given way on, is making time for face-to-face stuff and replacing it by group stuff or e-mail-type indirect stuff—even before e-mail there



were some people that tried to do business by memos. Never worked very well at Evergreen, so there was lots of distress about how come, blah blah blah. Well, it's a face-to-face place.

**Smith:** It is.

**Knapp:** At least the good that happened was often some face-to-face business.

**Smith:** The other structural thing I remember—because I was the Space Dean first—was moving everybody every year so they were teams together, thinking that promoted face to face. But it didn't, number one, because people didn't spend much time in their office. That was one thing that we changed and it didn't matter.

**Knapp:** Maybe not. I remained forever a fundamentalist about that. Just knowing the research about who talks to who and also just watching all of our behavior, there was a price that was paid. But it was not going to be acceptable to people to do.

**Smith:** Linda Kahan, I couldn't move her. It was like moving the Titanic. [laughing]

**Knapp:** Exactly. That was the curriculum building side of things. I ran a student-involvement version, a way of doing student involvement that involved getting a draft curriculum up and then getting students to comment on it.

**Smith:** Was that the "trial balloon"?

**Knapp:** Yes. That's my term.

**Smith:** Did you start that then as a dean?

**Knapp:** Yes. It's an example of a set of threads that if you look at the kind of place we sort of are, certain things are going to happen and certain things aren't going to happen. They're going to happen one way or another regardless of what they're called. Both the need and wish to have students somehow involved in shaping the curriculum and the things that keep that from happening effectively go on being present. That's just sort of ongoing reality about stuff, and another of those things that needs to be muddled and managed and can be done more or less well. In a bad time they're not being done very well and in a good time they are.

**Smith:** Right. What happened in your second rotation into deaning? How were things different?

**Knapp:** I went into that on account of hiring. It felt like a generational time. There was going to be turnover, a lot of turnover. Then there had been a bunch of issues that I was partly aware of through Helena and partly just from talking.

**Smith:** Part-time studies?

**Knapp:** The whole visiting temporary appointment kind of stuff was creating enormous amounts of distress and dissension. Jose Gomez had made a start on that, and somehow I was paying enough attention or aware of it and thought when the opening came along that I wanted to be—as the line from the musical *Hamilton* said—I wanted to be in the room when the key things were being set up. And I did some things for the hiring process that I'm very proud of, and I don't think lasted particularly well because Evergreen isn't a place where things last particularly well.

**Smith:** What were those things?

**Knapp:** The first was to realize that one of the problems was long-time visitors—this was regular faculty—being turned down when a regular position became available. This was just an ingredient but it was an important one. They were not understanding their relation to the hiring process correctly; they were counting on people knowing who they were and what they'd done, which is a natural enough thing.

**Smith:** But they didn't.

**Knapp:** But, in fact, the committees were expecting on-campus candidates to produce the same focus and the same kinds of things as people from off-campus that nobody knew. I began advising them to, first of all, take the same time off from your teaching that you would if you were making a campus visit anywhere else. Get your team to do that for you. Secondly, treat the committee and everyone as if they don't know you. You're going to do what you would do in any job interview.

**Smith:** Kind of coaching.

**Knapp:** That was a coaching kind of thing, and it fell completely within the legitimate realm for me as the dean to say, "Your kind of application needs coaching in a different way." People from off-campus call up and ask what to do, and you say what you legitimately can to help. That was one thing.

The second was to say, "We're going to make decisions. There's a subject matter committee—it was called a subcommittee but it was a committee—and there's the whole faculty whatever it's called."

**Smith:** Hiring DTF.

**Knapp:** "They have different roles and different jobs and they both matter a lot. There's a lot of ill will being generated by people not understanding that. So, we're going to make the actual hiring decisions together; that the subcommittee is going to sit down with the whole DTF to talk over an individual job

opening and the candidates together. The goal will be that we all agree on what we're doing at the end." That worked extremely well for me.

**Smith:** That makes a lot of sense.

**Knapp:** Right, and it was a way of using the fluidity of our structure. Because it wasn't all hard and fast written down anyplace, there was an assumption that subcommittee reported to the main committee and then the main committee might or might not do what they wanted. But this way the arguments were going to be all out and people would have a chance to have their say. That all felt quite good, and actually looking at some of the hires that we made during that time, they stand up pretty well.

I gathered all of the documents about this together and the history—there was a bunch of things to know what we had done and how we were writing letters to people and so forth—gathered carefully into a box to hand over to Nancy Taylor, my very good longtime friend who was going to be the dean after me, so that we could keep the continuity going and not lose—it wasn't so much my contributions, but just to have a sense that there was an organized way that we doing things and we didn't have to invent it over again.

Several years later I saw Nancy in London. We were walking around. She was out of the deanship at that point. The subject came up and I said, "I left all these records for you about how we did it." She said, "Oh, yeah, I threw that out." [laughter]

That was one of those moments when I really had a sort of parting of the ways feeling about the culture. It wasn't so much about her individually—she's a perfectly upstanding, sensible person—but the culture wasn't ready to understand how to make use of its history. That was a moment of me taking a step sideways and thinking, oh, well, I guess I don't really fit. It wasn't an ultimate feeling, but it was a step away from thinking that I belonged in the place and understood the place to thinking, oh, maybe I am really operating on a different wavelength from everybody.

**Smith:** Yeah, that's something I've never understood and feel the same way about. Like just seeing how the '96 long-range curriculum and the structure we put in place were just like disappeared like overnight, with no probing of the whys wherefores or when.

**Knapp:** No, but some others were monopolizing people's minds.

**Smith:** Yeah. Some people say we have "founders' fever" when we can't let go of that. But it seems to me that there's certain processes that learn from history, without just mindlessly following them.

**Knapp:** Yes. Quite a lot of the practice and the talk is about mindlessly doing things or mindlessly not doing things. The trick is we set up what we set up to deal with some deep educational problems, and I came to Evergreen partly because I'd been teaching just long enough to see what some of the structural problems were in the conventional thing. Evergreen had defined an important bunch of those out of existence. We were still going to have plenty of trouble because teaching is really hard, but at least we weren't having to do with A, B, C, D, E and F. It's very easy over a generation to lose track of that and then to have present-day problems get solved by creating the problems that you were trying to escape from in the first place.

**Smith:** Right. Same deal with program histories, which seemed like such a smart thing. Because sometimes you hear from people, "Why didn't they tell me about this?" It's like they're begging for talking to people that have been there before, yet there's a resistance. I'm thinking of Peter Tommerup's dissertation on Evergreen and how reinvention is a core value. And I think autonomy is a core value as well.

**Knapp:** Yes, and one of the balancing things that we haven't succeeded in doing—now we're getting a little cosmic about the talk—but we haven't really got straight about autonomy. The autonomy at Evergreen is unbelievable and it has extremely valuable results, and it has its shadow side and people haven't been willing to sit down and deal with the shadow side in a way that keeps the valuable stuff alive and going.

**Smith:** That seems all locked into this need for face-to-face time, and not getting too large, and a whole bunch of factors enable or get in the way of that.

**Knapp:** Absolutely. I think that's completely right. I ended up in my last several years of teaching saying to people—not helpfully but it was the thing that I said—while I was trying to get them to do something, "Well, I know everyone at Evergreen is as busy as they can be. Everyone is using all their time, so the choices are about what you use your time on, it's not about adding things." People were systematically finding it hard to think about change.

**Smith:** I think we all have different bandwidths, too, and energy. I'm a great multitasker but a lot of people aren't. They're deep thinkers instead of this breadth thing that I've got. [laughing]

**Knapp:** Yep. But whatever bandwidth people have, the replacing—reprioritizing—has been very hard for people to do.

**Smith:** Right.

**Knapp:** Good. How are we doing now?

**Smith:** We're doing fine. Talk now a little bit about planning units, specialty areas, fields of study, that whole deal about how we organized our work. And you were one of many that joined the emergent new areas.

**Knapp:** Let's see. In terms of my experience, which is really what this record is about, the first was about what I called the "indoor sciences," which had various names—scientific knowledge and inquiry, blah blah blah. Where the planning job was basically fairly simple because there was a kind of clear understanding about sequences and oh what kind of made sense to do.

**Smith:** And it was related to the students we were getting?

**Knapp:** I think it was moderately well but not exceptionally well related to the students we were getting. But that's actually kind of an interesting part of the story. The introductory and mid-level stuff that we were doing was perfectly sensible. But, especially in the physics end the proportion of people that major in physics is always quite small, and in a small college we probably had as many students as most places in proportion. But we have a module of 20 or 25 that you need to justify a single faculty member and if you're doing straight-up physics in what I think of as the Sig Kutter model, you don't have 25 students each year to do the junior-level stuff, and this would be an astonishing college if we did. And nothing about our recruitment was setting us up to get 25 physics majors. Right?

**Smith:** No.

**Knapp:** So, what were we going to do? Sig's [Kutter] model—and he wasn't the only person who sort of thought this way—was, well, we have to do it so we're just going to have to run small classes and get dispensation, or maybe we should make our introductory lectures bigger and sort of walk down the old path. That's why the traditional path is the way it is.

I got involved in that part by saying, "Well, we could take advantage of things like the ability to transfer into accredited engineering programs, and if we did the right stuff then the students could easily transfer." It would be more applied, but that also might get more students interested. When I began teaching Physical Systems, which was well into the '80s, we were able to get quite reasonable enrollment. They were a little light but they weren't bad. They were in the tolerance zone.

Several of those kids actually went on to become engineers. Two of them are among the students I am most pleased to have been associated with. I don't actually claim much credit for their

success except to not having got in the way of it, if you see what I mean. [laughter] Both in building- and energy-oriented kind of stuff.

When we began teaching Energy Systems there was a natural way that a whole applied area could be linked with some of the fundamental stuff that physical science would want. There were issues, but basically that was possible.

At the same time I became aware—and I'm not the only person—that there was some research out there about how conventional physics and math teaching didn't work very well. This is the . . .

**Smith:** . . . Calculus Reform Project.

**Knapp:** Calculus reform is where it most began but similar research was being done in physics. As you probably remember, it revolved around, okay, you take people that got A's in the introductory course and you ask them some qualitative questions that they should be able to answer if they understand the material in the way that the A indicates that they do—and they can't.

**Smith:** I loved that! [laughing]

**Knapp:** Only 60 percent get this question right.

**Smith:** Test takers don't do application as well.

**Knapp:** Yeah, what the A represented was a certain piece of the ability but not what you thought it represented. That spoke to me. It also spoke to the question of why so many people dropped out of physics, women especially. For personal family background reasons but also just as a teacher, I was very interested in helping everybody go forward as far as they could, women and men. Let's figure it out, is my feeling. We shouldn't be doing things in ways that block you. These are tough subjects. Not everyone is going to be a wild success, but you should be able to go as far as you can.

There was actually quite heartrending, I think, research about the dropout rates and why people dropped out of normal introductory physics and how bad the experience was for them, and when I saw that I thought there was even a moral problem here; if you teach in the conventional way, you are creating suffering in a way that you can't justify. It's normally justified by the fact that, well, it's probably good for them. In any case, look, we have these great physics majors and they're getting Nobel Prizes and so forth. But when you add up the number of people that dropped out and what they said about the experience of the first year of physics, it was an unacceptable price.

I got very interested in the reform side of things, and part of my rummaging downstairs is going to be about, so what did I actually do about that? I worked on it quite hard and was quite successful in

the classroom in getting things to move, and also found that in terms of the planning area, there was very little other interest in it, which was two things, I think. One is us physicists were a totally centrifugal bunch of people. If you think about who we were, post-Byron we were me and Rob Cole and Don Middendorf and Jake Romero and Sig [Kutter] for a while. There was one other person, I think [Tom Grissom?]. Our directions were all different from each other. Not just different from convention.

**Smith:** Although Rob Cole has some similarities to you.

**Knapp:** Some similarities, but he decided at a point when I thought I could team up with him to be the people that would get this reform thing going in physics, he announced that he was switching his emphasis to environmental studies because he thought that was where the most meaningful formation of people's understanding needed to happen at this time.

And Don had this whole sort of dream life was such a big thing for him. Completely genuine. This really lively, talented, energetic guy but we weren't going to be going on the same path. And I was pretty sort of "This is what I want to do and I don't want to do what you want to do." I was contributing to that.

That was the first part of it, and the second is it turns out that there's a real difference in mentality between physics and math faculty and chemistry and biology faculty. Chemists and biologists were quite resistant to any reform stuff and quite happy with how it was going and unwilling to look hard at it, and in my case apparently, ready to think that I was trying to teach calculus without any syllabus or plan, so they didn't want to teach with me. I don't know. That was a wisp in the air. I don't want to emphasize it too much.

In any case I can say that I didn't feel that they were after anything. This is the phrase that came to me. They wanted Evergreen to be a pretty good small college.

**Smith:** That's like what Jeff Kelly said. "We're the best community college in the state."

**Knapp:** That was a putdown when he said it, but he would have liked us to be a quite good small college, like, I don't know, like Whitman. I wanted Evergreen to be a much bigger deal than that, much more transformative than that.

So, not speaking for all the physicists and mathematicians but just for me, I and the chemists and biologists were going to have a lot of trouble working together. My work on trying to rethink and do reformed physics in the Evergreen mode—namely to have it actually mesh with chemistry—I figured

out how to do that over two years in the early 2000s. But all that the rest of the area was ready to do was to give me a visiting chemist to do it with, and enrollments were very small.

I said, “Okay, I’m not willing to do this if the rest of the area doesn’t care about it that much, and we’re stuck in a thing that can only get us to half strength in students, it’s not defensible in Evergreen’s terms. I’m going to step out.”

There was a period of rethinking. Krishna [Chowdary] came, who’s a fantastically interesting and lively guy and David Macavity came. There was some energy and stuff and I think they’re in the course of inventing something that works okay.

**Smith:** Interesting.

**Knapp:** But I was out of there.

**Smith:** Makes me wonder. If you parsed all the faculty into their disciplinary backgrounds if there’s that much heterogeneity and difference within. I think the closer you get to people of your own discipline, the more judgmental in some ways you are.

**Knapp:** Well, there’s that.

**Smith:** In a way Evergreen’s interdisciplinary-ness is a better way to support faculty learning because they’re more open.

**Knapp:** Sure. Certainly most disciplines have a kind of judgmental side about, is this the real thing? Is it rigorous enough?

**Smith:** Especially in English. [laughing]

**Knapp:** And in psychology. It’s everywhere.

Time is sort of marching on, I think. We aren’t going to get to the end of this topic.

**Smith:** No. Talk about your career in retrospect—tradeoffs, done work, fulfillment.

**Knapp:** Actually it’s a little premature to do that. What I’m doing right is I’m writing a book that’s not about Evergreen. It’s about lessons to be learned for sustainability from Amory Lovins’s 1983 house in Colorado. He’s someone I’ve known for a long time and so I’ve got a lot of access to the history and records, and a bunch of thoughts about sustainability. So, that’s already kind of behind but it’s happening.

**End Part 5 ZOOM0007**

**Begin Part 6 ZOOM0008**



[Nothing transcribed. One second in length.]

**End Part 6 ZOOM0008**

**Begin Part 7 ZOOM0009**

**Knapp:** . . . the imagination the energy and the commitment to get the good things to happen, which is going to take continued imagination, energy and commitment.

**Smith:** Right.

**Knapp:** I put a lot of that stuff in and I learned a lot. Couldn't have been a better place to be a teacher. I came to Evergreen with quite a good education and I'm so much better educated now than I was then, and it's been a place where that was possible. I look at that with terrific delight and respect and value.

And where, unlike people I know in lots of their careers—and a fair number of Evergreen people—for me it was not a place that I burned out on. Because it changed enough and because the door was open for trying out ideas, there was always stuff to do that was really interesting. And since there was no one guru to bow in front of in thanks, one just has to thank the collectivity, the collection of people.

I think Byron played a big role in that for me. But then lots of other people did critical things. Charlie Teske did a few things. We talked together once, which everybody should have talked with Charlie Teske, just because as a teacher he was a very special person, quite unusual and difficult and preposterous in various ways.

**Smith:** Can you tell a story about that, or what you learned?

**Knapp:** I can tell two little stories. The teaching one was him reading aloud the little romantic poem, the really short one, which I don't remember, but it was about whoever it was—Keats or whoever—writing about a young woman who was such and such and now has died and is “rolled round in earth's diurnal course with rocks and stones and trees” is the way it ends. He read that in a way—it was just in the course of class, it was his lecture time—read it in a way that showed how the regular rhythm—he didn't comment on this at all, he just read it—the regular rhythm of the first lines gave way to this different and more jumbled rhythm at the end where the guy was saying how sad he was that this person was gone. Charlie just understood the language and the rhythm—and he's a good musician—well enough to have that happen to me at that particular moment.

**Smith:** He radiated the cadence and the feeling?

**Knapp:** Exactly. That was a moment when he taught me something. The second was him changing my view about interim student evaluations. It's a year-long program, you say to students each quarter. Early on I just made some notes and had a talk with the student and then wrote the full evaluation at the end of the year.

Charlie said quite firmly, "No, you have to write it down. You could get run over by a bus," or something like that. And I began doing it and discovered that, A, it made the conferences much better. And B, as we began to trade students around, there was some real stuff for me going to my colleagues and vice versa. And C, writing the final evaluation was much easier because I'd already written some of it.

I will say another thing. This is a side thing, but about evaluations, which we all, of course, gripe about. I figured out over the course of time what I think the right approach and the right justification for writing a narrative evaluation is. It's not about saying, "So and so jumped through this hurdle or that hurdle or did such and such well on this kind of lab experiment." It's about thinking of what kinds of good work the student did. And out of all the many kinds—and I began running a little session at the beginning of the year with students to explain that they were going to end up in a narrative evaluation, and what was that all about? It was going to be about good work. So (I say to the students) let's think about different kinds of good work.

I would start it—me at the blackboard again, right? I'd say, "Well, someone could be careful, or someone could be accurate. Those aren't the same thing, are they?" "Oh, yeah, right." "Well, let's gather some more adjectives that are about good work." In about 15 minutes, you would have 35 different kinds of good work.

Then you have a reason for writing a narrative that says, "I'm going to tell you about this student. This student is good—this is a careful yet quite slow-moving student." "This is a lively, imaginative student, and also an extremely careful one."

**End Part 7 ZOOM0009**

**Begin Part 8 ZOOM0010**

**Knapp:** We sort of lost that track a little bit. We were looking back. Yes, this was a really valuable place where I got a good education. I was not very good about keeping track of students after they left and what happened to them. I know about some. And I was not very good about measuring effectiveness. I think these days maybe there are ways to do that that don't get in the way and don't prejudge things too much, but still lets you know whether what you think is happening is really happening.

So, I don't have a solid sense. I know that I got along well with students and they liked the experience, and that's a big part of it. In a way, if they were doing the work and liking the experience, they were learning something.

**Smith:** When you compare to like if Rob Knapp had gone and taught conventional physics in a brand X, and compare with the growth you had, it's just stunning how much learning is happening at Evergreen and has happened.

**Knapp:** Yes. There's no comparison. Maybe part of what the college should be thinking is finding ways to really use that—validate it and recognize it and use that.

In any case, in a month's time I'll know more about what I think about all this after I go through the basement [laughter] and see what I've kept and that kind of thing.

**Smith:** That's great.

**Knapp:** Okay, good.

**End Part 8 ZOOM0010**