

**Interview Subject: Dr. Robert Plane**  
**Interviewer: Laura Ettinger**  
**Date of interview: July 8, 2010**

**Today is July 8, 2010, and we're here at the Clarkson Inn in Potsdam, New York. I'm Laura Ettinger, and I am here with President Robert Plane, who was Clarkson's President from 1974-1985, I believe.**

Correct.

**Okay. Good. The first thing I'm interested in knowing about is the incredible increase in the number of women during your time here. I understand that during your time [as president], the percentage and the number of women students increased dramatically. And I'd like to know how that happened and why that happened.**

That was conscious. When I came for an interview, there were maybe six women in the student body, and the school was in a certain amount of financial difficulty. It was one of those downturns of engineering, which goes through cycles. And as I was talking with someone who will remain nameless, I said, "What are the plans to do something about this?" He said, "Well, you could take in more women to study engineering." And, that was a new thought to me. I decided we'd suddenly—the pool of applicants,

**Uh huh.**

and I had been at Cornell where I knew more about minorities than I did about women, although I was learning about women because this was 1974. There was starting to be a feminist movement in universities everywhere. And so I'd been through all that stuff. Well, as an aside, Cornell had a quota on women, of three women, to enter the vet college. I was the provost, so I was in charge of the deans, and I would argue with that dean, but I couldn't get anywhere. He had his own budget and state university. Many years later, when I was President at Wells, I signed an agreement with one of my former students, who was then Dean of the Veterinary School [at Cornell], and when we signed it, he said, "There's only one thing," and this is for Wells College, and we really got a sweetheart deal for those women at Wells; he said, "I wish there was a men's college." And, I said, "Why's that?" He said, "We're about 70 percent women at this stage."

**(laughter)**

So, they really did it right. Clarkson didn't do quite that well. But what I was going to say was that I got from this person, the idea [that] this was to be a conscious effort. That's where our growth was. One of the first things I remember doing was going around noticing the signs on the restrooms that said, "faculty," and they were men's rooms. So, I made them take [and] change those. The compromise was [that] they made them say "private."

**(laughter)**

But, anyway, at least it didn't send out the message that there was no such thing as women faculty. And we started getting women faculty in. One of the big pushes was with the Society of Women Engineers chapter.

**Uh huh.**

I didn't know anything about them. We didn't have such a thing at Cornell. But some of the women students knew. And, so I did everything possible to help them; we were the outstanding SWE Chapter for eight or nine years. And, then I think it was about the last year I was here, somebody beat us out - the boogers.

**(laughter)**

But, that was a good thing for us. I thought, also, that Clarkson had the perfect fit because these are the days of wild student unrest on campuses. Clarkson was calm. You'd send your daughters to Clarkson. You wouldn't send them to University of Rochester or Cornell. But, you could send them up here. This was a safe place.

**Uh huh.**

And so we had everything going for us. Cornell was the only Ivy League school, at that time, which admitted women, really, not to a coordinate college but to the college. But they had a quota. They said it was because of dorm space. But it was a quota. But the ratios were up at three men per woman. But this was very attractive to many women.

**(laughter)**

So, I figured if three to one was attractive, what is three hundred to one?

**(laughter)**

And, so anyway, we built the thing. So, the important thing was it was a conscious effort.

**Uh huh.**

And, we recruited women faculty. We did everything we could. I remember that there were so few women faculty in engineering available. But we did everything we could to—I also had an argument with one of the deans over women being paid less than a man. Partly, I misread it. She was half-time; her name was Meyer, and she was a mathematician, and her husband was Bob Meyer [professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering].

**Susan Conry [professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering].**

Susan Conry! That's right.

**Yeah.**

That's right. Is she still here?

**Yes.**

Susan came; she was half-time in arts and half-time in engineering. The arts guy and I saw it, and I thought she was getting half the pay of Bob. So I went to Milt Kerker, who was the dean [of the School of Arts and Science], and I said, "Hey! You're going to get in great trouble if you persist in this." And, he said, "Well, she's only half-time."

**(laughter)**

But, then we did the arithmetic, and it was off by ten dollars. So, I made him give her a ten dollar raise.

**(laughter)**

Or, something like that. Anyway, to quickly answer your question: it was conscious.

**What kinds of things did you try to do to recruit students, if you remember? To recruit female students? Because I assume that might have been difficult since Clarkson, you know—**

Well, originally, the women all lived in—these were the days of segregated dorms—all lived in the Clarkson family home.

**Holcroft.**

Holcroft. Right. And, it was grim. It was dirty, and so we got a better wing in the dorm; I've forgotten which one it was. But we—

**Was this Moore House?**

Yes, I guess it was Moore House.

**Yeah.**

And we eventually called it Moore House.

**Yeah.**

And I thought that was appropriate because I don't know if you know the story of Mrs. [Emily V. Clarkson] Moore, but she was disowned by her relatives [Mrs. Emily V. Clarkson was disowned by her family for marrying Mr. William Moore who was beneath the Clarksons socially.] But she was good to the college, and the rest of them weren't.

**(laughter)**

So, anyway, she was our ideal. So yes, it was Moore House that became a women's residence hall.

**So, you're saying, that helped recruit [women].**

That helped recruit [women], and the other thing, we made sure when women came on campus to visit, they talked with the other women.

**Uh huh.**

And I talked with the other women to make sure that there weren't any problems that were going to come up—that should be solved before we recruited more women.

**Right. May I ask what kinds of problems (inaudible)?**

I was just worried about, oh! I remember one time [at] a fraternity party, a male student spit beer on a woman student. Just the board or whatever it was that handled such things, didn't expel him but suspended him for a year.

**Wow.**

I didn't object. I just let it all [play out],

**(laughter)**

but this family sued, but we sued back and we won, and he stayed out for a year.

**What about going to something else: I know Clarkson went co-ed in 1964. Do you know why it went co-ed at that particular time?**

I don't,

**Or, who made the decision?**

because there was not much sympathy on the campus, as I indicated.

**Yeah.**

And, I think there were like six or eight [women students initially], but those women, when they came back to reunion, they were tigers.

**Yeah. I'm sure. (laughter)**

They had fought the battles

**Yeah.**

and they came back 100% to reunion. I don't know; it could have been that the trustees were more enlightened than the administration.

**Uh huh.**

I just don't know.

**So, again, you were saying that even at the time you arrived, which would have been ten years after co-education began in a limited way, there wasn't sympathy here?**

It was a token.

**Yeah. And,**

Oh! We started the women's hockey team then too, for recruiting purposes. And, I hear they did well this year.

**Yes. Absolutely. They did fantastically.**

Yeah.

**I take my daughters to the games. In your remarks, I read something from the [Clarkson University] archives, from something you said at the Roundtable Dinner in January, 1985 - the year you were leaving.**

(laughter) (Inaudible).

**(laughter) You said, "No change during my years at Clarkson has been more profound," and you meant than the dramatic increase in women students. Can you say more about that? About what effect women had on Clarkson, on campus culture, on anything.**

It made it much more cultured. When I first came, it was pretty uncivilized, and careful here.

**(laughter)**

I mean, they talked about living in the pit. And the pit was the pit. And, do they still call it the pit? They put a top on it.

**Yeah.**

It's still the pit.

**It's still the pit.**

Life here was—we tried to do a lot of things. I talked with Egon [Matijević, long-time professor of chemistry at Clarkson] last night about it, to try and get the Clarkson students more cultured. And the liberal studies thing was part of it too. Get them more cultured, because I felt it was dollars in our pocket. And the one thing they were interested in was dollars in the pocket.

**Uh huh.**

To just raise the social level because we were kind of down at the bottom of the social level.

**Uh huh.**

And so having women on campus made a tremendous difference in just the general atmosphere, the civility, the people shaved,

**(laughter)**

and dressed better, and were polite,

**Uh huh.**

because Clarkson kids are well behaved, or they were then. I hope they still are.

**They are.**

And so they wanted to be ladies and gentlemen. And they were. So that was what I had in mind.

**Were there other ways in which women affected the campus or had, or sort of had an impact? [It] sounds like that's the main way that you were thinking of.**

Yeah. I'm sure that they overcame the prejudice that women can't do math, and this kind of thing. They saw that they could do that.

**Right.**

So they educated men; women were [still seen as] second class citizens. And they beat some of those prejudices,

**Uh huh.**

which was good for the men.

**Can you say more about that the reaction of male students on campus to the women here? And [of] faculty, [which] as you were saying, were majority male, and probably not very used to teaching women.**

One woman told me that she was in electrical engineering and she was in the class, and everything was fine until first exam. And, the professor said—I'm pretty sure it was electrical engineering, but I have no idea who the professor was, "Well, you're from Potsdam State, aren't you? What are you taking the exam for?" So, yes, there was a problem, and the culture was always slow to change.

**Right.**

But I think probably the faculty was slower to change than the students.

**Interesting.**

Probably.

**And, then specifically within engineering, what would you say about male engineering students, male engineering faculty, or is that what you're talking about here?**

We were three quarters engineers at that stage.

**Right.**

And yes, I have to be careful; in general, engineers are not the quickest to change ways. They tend to be pretty—, and scientists in general are, and I'm a scientist - I'm not an engineer, I'm a scientist. And we tend to dig in deeper and deeper into our own field and don't worry about other things, and so don't notice what's going on around us sometimes

**Yeah.**

if it doesn't affect my field.

**Sounds challenging.**

Yeah.

**And, speaking of challenges from an administrative perspective, what were some of the challenges you faced once the women were here on campus? You did marketing to try to recruit them here, and you upgraded their living spaces and that kind of thing. Once they were here, what were some of the challenges that you faced, and how did the administration deal with that?**

Well, I always felt the best thing for me to do in all of these matters was to eat in the dorms with the students.

**Uh huh.**

And keep my ears to the ground.

**Uh huh.**

And know what was going on. And, if I heard anything that even sounded like it could lead to problems, I tried to be one jump ahead. Like the salary thing.

**Yeah.**

I just plain misread the paper and got excited.

**(laughter)**

I do that sometimes. You know George Davis?

**I know of him. Yes.**

He was the Dean of Students, and George was very good at—very sensitive to problems that women would have.

**Uh huh.**

And he was extremely helpful. We had very few women faculty, but I tried to do everything I could to—Anybody in the arts was [seen as a] second-class citizen. And that's where most of the women were—not necessarily majoring [in the liberal arts]. I don't know if we had a disproportionate number of [women undergraduate] majors [in the liberal arts].

**You mean faculty?**

We didn't really have majors [in the arts]. Faculty - that's where the women were.

**Right.**

Anyway, so I had to make sure the women faculty were treated equally.

**Right.**

And if they were in a less "in" field.

**Sounds challenging also. I want to quote something else that you said, that I'm sure you don't remember. This is from an article from the *Clarkson Integrator* [the campus newspaper]. This is from November, 1975—so a long time ago. It noted that you participated in a SWE [Society of Women Engineers] student conversation that took place on campus, and the final discussion of the day was - great title - Personal and Personnel Problems of Professional Women. And, according to the article, before the discussion began, President Robert Plane of Clarkson College made a statement concerning equal rights and women at Clarkson in today's society. Can you say more, if you remember,**



**about your feelings about equal rights in that era? I mean, it's an early era—and about women in higher education. You said that when you were at Cornell that you were particularly attuned to issues connected with minorities there, but knew less about, it sounds like, women in higher education. So how did you come to your views?**

Well, let me first explain that statement.

**Yeah.**

My job at Cornell was the biggest job, and the biggest job in the university was black students.

**Uh huh.**

And I spent 20 hours a day worrying about the problems that black students had on campus. So that one I knew cold. And I hadn't spent as much time with women students.

**Right.**

The problems that time simply were to get women to be treated equally to men. Affirmative action was not a necessity. All we had to do was to see that women got an equal shot at it. I have no idea what I said in that talk. I probably gave examples of where they weren't getting an equal shot.

**Uh huh.**

And salaries are the most obvious, and still are. I don't remember much more than that.

**Right.**

Except that I really want to be blindfolded in that one and hire a person and not know if they're a woman or a man. And I felt the women would make out fine if that were done.

**You were here for quite a while, right? And, so**

Eleven years.

**between '74 and '85 - what kinds of changes did you see in terms of attitudes among administrators, faculty, [and] students about gender?**

There were problems at first, and I don't remember any problems at the end.

**Okay.**

So, I think things during that time got just fine.

**Changed (inaudible).**

And you know, my most important job was to set a good example.

**Uh huh.**

And at that time, I had two daughters at home and a wife who's always been very—her mother was one of the people that, what do you call them? Suffragettes.

**Uh huh.**

And she was the first woman faculty member at the University of Eastern Illinois. So I had a background that

**(laughter)**

made me sensitive.

**That's wonderful.**

And, you see, my daughter's field is.... [Dr. Plane's daughter is Ann Marie Plane, Professor of History at the University of California at Santa Barbara. She specializes in gender history.]

**Yes, that's amazing to me. As I said [to you before the interview], I assigned one of her articles in my women's history class. You were saying earlier something about SWE, and I'm just going to check the time so I'm conscious of that.**

Okay.

**So, we're okay.**

Okay.

**Why don't we go maybe another five minutes? Does that sound good?**

Yes, that'd be fine.

**Okay.**

Or, even ten.

**Okay.**

Shoot for five and we'll do ten.

**Okay. That sounds great. Can you say more about the role of SWE on campus? I know that the engineering dean served in an advisory capacity to the organization.**

Was it [the] dean or the assistant?

**Dean [Edward] Misiaszek.**

Yes. Misiaszek.

**Yes.**

He was the assistant dean.

**Okay.**

(Inaudible).

**But can you say more about the kind of place it had on campus or, you mentioned that it was....**

You know, in general, and I imagine it's still this way, honor societies only go so far.

**Right.**

And it was like an honor society.

**Uh huh.**

It was fine, but it didn't necessarily mean these were lasting friendships.

**Right.**

It was a good thing. But, actually, at first, no - at first, it was more than that. At first, it was a place where women, I'm sure, by being together felt more secure and could help each other. And, so I think it was, in fact, what really kept them together.

**Early on?**

Early on.

**Yeah.**

When there were just a handful [of women]. I don't remember now, but I think it's loose enough that almost any woman at Clarkson could have joined.

**Yes.**

So, I think all of them did.

**Right. Non-engineering majors as well.**

Yes. Exactly.

**And, that's still [the case]; non-engineers can join.**

Can they?

**Uh,**

Are you telling me or are you asking me?

**Yeah, I'm pretty sure that that's the case. Although, there's also now on campus SPW, Society of Professional Women. So, non-engineering women often join that.**

Join that one. I see.

**Uh,**

How many women, what's the ratio now?

**Now? You know, I don't know for the incoming class; it's been like 20%--around there. In engineering, I'm trying to remember what the percentage is. Nationally, in engineering, it's around 19/20%. Here, we have a smaller percentage of women. It's in the sciences actually, that we get more women. In arts and sciences, anyway, it's 50%. It's 50/50. I don't know the percentage in business. And I know it's lower in engineering. I know that there are great efforts to recruit women here, and a lot of programs on campus to try to keep women here. There's a new program called WiSE: Women in Science and Engineering, and it's a living/learning community in a dorm. Starting with the freshman year, [there's special] programming—you know, not only classroom work, but also programming to try to keep the women here.**

Oh, that's good.

**Yes. I think that's a great idea too. What about other organizations or groups on campus during your era, that might have been important to women? You mentioned women's hockey?**

Yes. Women's hockey and I don't think, I can't remember what the (inaudible), see - I get this mixed up with Wells College.

**Right.**

Where I was afterwards. But I don't think there were--, at first at least, there were no sororities.

**Right.**

And the other thing, I think in general, and this is just an impression, probably not true, that we did not have trouble with retaining women because if we had, I would have, I think I would be aware of it now. And, in general, they were better students. And, so they tended to outlast the men that we lost.

**Uh huh.**

One of our problems was that we had a big influx of transfer students. And I remember we really had trouble getting women in those transfer classes. I don't know why.

**That's interesting.**

But that was a problem. That's my impression. Again, I could be wrong.

**I know under your reign the Clarkson School [an early college program for talented high school students, founded in 1978] began. Did that help to attract more women?**

Yeah, because that was about 50/50, but we set it up so we really did not want to use that as a recruiting device for Clarkson, but it became our recruiting device for Clarkson.

**An unintended consequence.**

Exactly. We really wanted to do something different and just get each kid in a place where that kid belonged. Whether that was Harvard or whatever. Except Harvard won't take transfer students; they wouldn't give us credit.

**Frustrating.**

Our daughter went to Harvard. (laughter) I like to kid her.

**(laughter) What other people would you suggest that I talk to about sort of pioneering women?**

Is [Edward] Misiaszek still alive?

**No.**

Well, George Davis is alive. Why don't you talk to George?

**Okay. I have certainly heard a lot about him. Are there others you would suggest from your era?**

I would say, because you know them, Owen [Brady] and John [Serio, both long-time professors of humanities at Clarkson]. How about Susan? Sue was the first legitimate [woman] faculty member. She might know things I don't know.

**(laughter)**

You might learn some things from Susan.

**I'm sure. She's chair of the [Faculty] Senate and I'm vice-chair of the Senate right now. That sounds good. Anyone else?**

Well, you might talk to Ron Frazer. He coached the women's hockey team.

**Okay. I'm going to glance at my watch again. Is there anything else that you want to say about sort of co-education at that time, or women in engineering here? Anything else that you wanted to add? This has been very helpful.**

I can't think of anything.

**Okay.**

I think you've covered it all.

**Yes. I think so.**

Your questions were very good.

**Well, thank you. Thank you very much for taking the time to do this, and [I'm going to] turn this off now.**