

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Robert Aebersold Interview
October 21, 2008
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Sarah Meleski
Transcribed by Teresa DeBacco
Proofread and edited by Angela Rimmel, Rebecca Cunningham and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by Robert Aebersold

SM: I'm Sarah Meleski and as part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project, we have Dr. Robert Aebersold here with us today. How are you today?

RA: Fine, thank you, Sarah. I hope you are as well.

SM: I am. Well, why don't we start off—why don't you tell us a little about yourself? Some background information. You can start off with your childhood and then just kind of go up from there.

RA: Right, right: "At an early age I was a child" [laughs]. I was born in central Ohio and lived with my mother and my grandparents on a truck farm. My grandfather ran a greenhouse with my grandmother and grew a lot of vegetables. He processed beef and lamb and things like that for customers.

So I grew up there, about a mile and a half from town; went to school through the Granville, Ohio school system. No one else in my family had ever gone to college, so I went to college. I was fortunate enough to go to Ohio Wesleyan University, which was not too far away, and did my undergraduate work there. While I was there I was interested in physical education and athletics. [I] was not much of a participant from the standpoint of skill, but eventually decided I wanted to go into coaching. I also was interested in student personnel work because of a dean of men that I got to like very much.

I went to Ohio University to major in physical education and what was then called Human Relations, but basically it was student personnel work. [I] finished a master's degree there and went to Oberlin, Ohio, to teach in the public schools. I taught mostly junior high school science and coached football and baseball, and for a while some junior high school basketball. I guess I was there four or five years and decided I really wanted to work at college. So I left there, getting married to Nancy at the same time and going to Hanover College in Indiana. Hanover College was then a school of about twelve hundred students: a small liberal arts college. I coached, again, baseball and football there, and my wife and I ran a men's residence hall for the year we were

there. That was my first real experience with student affairs, and it was an interesting one [laughter]. But while doing that, again, in order to teach in college I knew I had to get a doctorate. So we left there and went to College Park, to the University of Maryland, where my wife taught and I went to graduate school for three years, finishing my doctorate about 1968, technically '69.

We came here the summer of '68. I was hired here to teach in the science areas of physical education and as assistant football—actually freshmen football, freshmen baseball coach, because freshmen weren't playing varsity sports in those days. In the Physical Education Department I taught anatomy, exercise physiology, and sports psychology and kinesiology and those things, and I did that—I've really kind of forgotten how many years I did that. Before too long I became coordinator of the graduate programs in Health and Physical Education and then department chair for several years.

At the time I was department chair there was a temporary vacancy in the vice president's office for a year or so while they were going through a vice presidential search. And so, through a search process, I was appointed to that position. A new president was hired and asked me to stay on in that position for a year. Then a search was run and I was a successful candidate in that search and I became vice president under Herb Reinhard. Herb Reinhard left after about five years. I was asked by the chancellor and the Board of Governors to become interim president, which I did. [I] was a candidate in that search and was a successful candidate there, becoming president about 1985. That's what I did until I retired in 1997. So . . . and since I've retired I'm doing other things. I've done some other jobs, just to keep busy. [I served as president of Springfield College and Central Connecticut State University. Also, I served two years in the Connecticut State University system as senior vice chancellor for academic affairs.]

SM: What Slippery Rock eras have you been here for? Like state college and stuff like that.

RA: When I arrived Slippery Rock was a state college, and then transitioned into Slippery Rock University at that point. That's where we are today.

SM: What changes did you see in the department that you were hired into?

RA: Well, in those days the primary programs at Slippery Rock were education and health and physical education. The physical education side was probably the biggest of all: at one point during that period of time we were at fourteen hundred majors and about forty-five or so faculty members. Way too [many] more students than made sense, but that's why students were coming here and that's what Admissions will do to admit them. The department—I came into a structure that had a Department of Health and Physical Education in the School of Education. In a short time after that there was a reorganization. In the reorganization it was taken from the School of

Education, and its own school was created as the School of Health and Physical Education, and then a number of years later “Recreation” was added to that title. Since then there have been other changes [to] which I wasn’t party.

SM: What buildings have you worked in?

RA: I spent most of my [working] life in Morrow Field House, before it was remodeled. And then the rest of the time in Old Main.

SM: What were some of your first impressions when you got here? How did you feel about the campus and how it looked?

RA: Well, the campus . . . I think one of the things that people realize when they’ve been some place for a while—and I realized it after a number of years as president talking to alums—that the campus, the state college or the university, changes over time and it’s a different thing at different times depending on what the various emphases are in terms of the needs of graduates, etcetera. I think that what was important to me was that Morrow Field House then was pretty much state of the art; it was pretty much on the forefront of those kinds of buildings in the [state] system. The old East [and] West Gyms are more typical of what schools had in the system. The penalty we paid for being in the forefront of that was probably that we still have it, and other places have added many more facilities to serve physical activities.

But I think it was clear from the beginning that Slippery Rock was a place that [was] small enough that people were interested in the students; people got to know you. People—faculty, administrators—knew students very well. In fact, most administrators taught. Many faculty members and all coaches taught, as a matter of fact. It was before the era of allowing coaches to coach and not teach. So people had very heavy teaching loads and at the same time made plenty of time for interaction with students in and out of class, and I think that was extremely important.

The other thing was that it was clear that given the physical facilities available, the land available, that there would be great opportunities in the future for growth. The institution was highly thought of; the physical education program itself was probably among the top five, at least, in the country and sought after. A person who graduated from here with an undergraduate degree had as much of an education as a master’s degree from many institutions. So it was very good to be part of something that I think was that accomplished.

SM: What changes did you see the university undergo? Were they for the better or for the worse, or both?

RA: Well, as I said there were a whole lot of changes. Obviously there were physical changes.

SM: That's the one thing people mostly talk about.

RA: Yeah, the physical changes ebb and flow. Physical changes only occur after someone in Harrisburg decides there's going to be money. And after they decide there's going to be money there has to be a long time and an effort put in to trying to spend the money. The best example of that is the music building that was approved as a fine arts building with enough money to build a building three times the size it is. By the time they got it built, it was one third the building. So there were those kinds of problems. There were a lot of changes and generally speaking for the good in terms of physical plant, there's no question about that.

I think probably the biggest change was—I can't tell you the exact year, but it was the movement on the part of the faculty to unionize. I know that well because I was a member of the faculty at the time. We had campaigns by two or three different potential partner unions, and we selected one and then began to work as a unionized faculty, which was new to all of us. That was quite a different situation. The faculty governing structure changed when we went to the union and the arrangements that we have today. I would say by large and by far, the institution is better for the establishment of the union when it was done. And I think that, with probably some arguable exceptions that occur periodically throughout the normal lifespan of administrations and unions, that it has been a positive thing. I think that it's been good for the academic program, it's been good for students, and I think ultimately it is a change for the better.

I think the nature of the student body has changed significantly because in those days almost everybody who was here was considering teaching. That began to change for a number of reasons. One, of course, was that teaching jobs began to get less plentiful, but also people began to have interest in other things, and the university began to have interest in other things. So I think that what occurred then was a growth of academic programs, the hiring of faculty with excellent credentials in things other than education, and it was a valuable time in the growth of university in terms of programs.

We were able to do some things that I think were quite valuable. For one thing, we began the first dance program in the state system institutions. I always kind of joke that with dance and art we helped to bring a different kind of student to campus. And that was true: these were students who tended to function a little differently sometimes than a math major or an education major, and it's just great to have a more diverse student group.

So diversity comes about in many ways. I don't think we've been able, in my period of time, to deal with diversity in terms of race as well as I would like to have seen it done, but there's been progress. So things have changed dramatically in many different areas, no question about it.

SM: What were some of your activities on campus, both while you were a teacher and while you were president?

RA: Well, as a faculty member I was involved for a lot of years in the university-wide Curriculum Committee, [which was] a function of the Faculty Council, the governing body of the faculty before the union. It remained then as a faculty assembly group after the union, but it was a critical group in terms of developing curriculum and those kinds of questions. I was involved in that.

I was involved for quite a number of years with [Cooperative Activities]. I was interested in that because a lot of what they funded had to do with Health, Physical Education and Recreation, and I felt that I could be helpful to them in terms of making some of those decisions. So I was involved with that.

Of course, I was coaching in the years before I became department chair. So I was involved in those things. You know as president it's kind of hard to pick out anything particular because basically

SM: You kind of do a little bit of everything.

RA: Yeah, you're kind of involved in everything that goes on whether you want you be or not. But on the other hand, you need to be. As president I tried to be involved in a lot of things that had student involvement. I was trying to show, and I believe that what we do is serve students; what we do is provide education for students. When decisions are being made, people need to think about, "How does that decision impact the education available for students? How does it affect students?" So I was involved in a lot of things there. Well, I guess that pretty well covers it, Sarah.

SM: What were some of your biggest accomplishments while you were here?

RA: That's probably something that somebody else will figure out at some point. Things that I'm most pleased about, I mentioned a couple situations. The development of the dance program I think was something that wasn't expected and I think it was something that got us some very positive notoriety across the education realm here.

I had been involved with others in trying to develop the physical therapy program for years, probably ten years before it came about it 1988 [with the master's degree, and in 1995 adding the doctorate]. An awful lot of time and effort were spent in developing that program. And again I think it was another one of those things that changed the nature of the university dramatically at the time. [It] still is an outstanding program. One of the differences is we had to fight so hard to get the program [and] a few years later the state was giving the program to almost anybody who wanted it, so there were very few programs [and] all the sudden there were a lot of programs. At one point, I would not be off to say that we had three hundred plus applications for a class that

might have twenty-four or twenty-five seats in it. That continued for a while. I think those things were important.

Trying to promote student involvement in things was important to me. I think we were successful in some ways. Sometimes students are too busy to be involved, there's just no question about it. But in order for education to function the way it should there needs to be student involvement in various activities.

We had two different occasions when students were very much involved in funding and moving forward with facilities. One was an addition of the racquetball courts to the field house, which at the time was an amazing undertaking. The other was the student funding and development of—a lot through the work of Bob DiSpirito—the student recreation center*, which took a lot of work and effort and time, and students were involved in it to the nth degree. There was always some flak around the students' work involvement. They were always involved; they were involved in the final decision-making of it.

I think another thing that was very helpful to us, and some outsiders may not notice but, the little art facility that we have was a building that had been a student union and Lord knows how many other things. It had burned down once in its history and been rebuilt. We had the Art Department in what was the old lab school, it's now Carruth-Rizza Hall. And we had been given money to do some work—not enough—in that old lab school that was going to make it more useable. It was a mess; it was falling apart. And some of us made such a case to the chancellor, in terms of health and safety, that we were permitted to take the money that was designated for rehabbing that building and use it to—for all practical purposes—rebuild what is now the art building . . . which is probably smaller than it ought to be and probably doesn't have everything it needs to have, but it gave the art faculty and the art students a place that was theirs, a place they could do the things they needed to do. I think it was extremely helpful to help people see that the university was growing and changing.

In the president's residence, at my wife Nancy's encouragement, all of the artwork in the public rooms was artwork of our faculty or our students. And my purpose for that, as we had a number of occasions at the residence, was to be able to show people that we were a liberal arts institution; we weren't any longer an institution that educated solely teachers: we did a lot of other things.

So, the addition of that art building and the addition of the dance program and the PT [physical therapy] program and there are probably some others—environmental education and others—we had ten or twelve new programs that we started in that period of time. [These] were things that

**the building was named Aebersold Recreation Center in his honor.*

helped show that Slippery Rock University was in fact evolving; it was changing, and improving. So those are things that I think are pretty significant in the long run in the history of the university.

SM: While you were a teacher, what were some of your best and worst teaching moments?

RA: [Laughs] I said to someone, “The problem with oral history is, it’s a good idea but you’re always asking old people; it depends too much on memory.” [Laughter] Best and worst moments . . . I don’t know. I enjoyed almost everything I taught. I had very few occasions or any particular problems or issues in class. It was a period of time when I had just attended graduate school. I taught a research methods course and every graduate student of HPER [Health, Physical Education and Recreation] had to take it. We had one graduate program in health that involved school nurses—school nurses would have to take that course—and usually it was in the first two or three courses in the program, depending on when they started. It was an interesting example because school nurses were generally a little bit older than the rest of the student body, and it was really an eye opener, it’s not a major story, but it was an eye opener to the difference between the typical student and the mature student.

One day it was snowing, it was getting pretty bad. I hardly ever called classes for snow. I figured people can get there, and the three nurses in the class always seemed to get there, coming from around Meadville somewhere. And that night they came in and only about half of the class was there, probably a class of sixteen or so. And one of the students, not the nurses, said, “Well, you know, looks like a lot of people can’t get here. Should we call off the class?” And I didn’t have to say anything; the three nurses immediately said, “No. We came all this way, we’re going to have class.” So we had class.

I say that’s not an interesting story, but it showed a difference in the attitude of students which began to appear more and more as there were more non-traditional, as we would call them, students in the undergraduate and graduate class. I don’t know the percentages today. I was president of a university a few years ago where about thirty-three percent of undergraduate students were older than the normal age of students. So it’s a growing phenomenon, and I think that that’s a major change. I don’t know, there weren’t any protests in my class . . .

SM: I know it’s kind of a general question, but . . .

RA: Yeah, I don’t know. I enjoy teaching and that was one of the things I missed about becoming an administrator, was teaching. One of the things when I was president: I used to visit a couple of classes. Coach DiSpirito had a class he taught on recreation administration, and I used to go there every semester to talk about leadership and talk about management, but always leaving about half the time or so, depending on the class size, to answer questions. That was probably the most exciting thing because those were always the questions like, “Why can’t I find

a place to park? How come the lights aren't on long enough? Why can't we stay in the library until two in the morning?" You know, all those kinds of questions. Anyway, I can't do much better than that.

SM: Who were some people that influenced you or were very significant to you during your time here?

RA: They go back, mostly go back a ways. Bob Lowry, who was the director of admissions for years before I got here, just did a fantastic job. And Bob Lowry was, in fact, acting president when I was hired. When I interviewed in the spring, the president was President Carter, who was actually in the process of being let go. When I got here in the summer, Bob Lowry was the president who signed my letter. So I've always told people that I wasn't hired, I was admitted by the Director of Admissions. Bob was a guy that I learned an awful lot [from] in terms of just kind of keeping your cool: the importance of not flying off the handle at things.

And there were some others: Wayne Walker was a Texan who came here as dean of the School of Education. He used to say he was here on missionary work from Texas. He was another guy like that.

He had lots of stories to tell. I think the one that struck me most in terms of the way I viewed things for years was that shortly after I became president, early in the fall, he and I had been at a meeting some place and he said, "Drive over to the stadium." Of course by that time the leaves were changing—they were beautiful—and we pulled over. He said, "Look out there. Isn't that beautiful?" I said, "It really is." The hillside was just full of all the colors; it was one of those beautiful fall days. "Yeah," I said, "It's really beautiful." And Wayne turned to me in his Texas way and said to me, "Well you know, if you begin to think it's yours, you're in trouble."

And I've taken that with me in terms of the real privilege that it is to be a manager, an administrator and how that privilege can't be wasted, can't be hijacked the way it has been hijacked more recently [in government and business], at least in some of the things we read about in the paper, with some leaders. Just take the university: the university doesn't belong to anybody but the people who are there at the time using it, and the job of the president or any other administrator is one of stewardship and it's one of seeing that the institution is better when you leave it than it was when you got there. And so I just thought that was good advice.

There were others: Bill Meise was the long-time dean of HPER [Health, Physical Education and Recreation], just a guy with a million stories. And Bob DiSpirito, long time coach, who was one of the guys that hired me and got me here; he's just retired a few years ago. And there were others, Martha Haverstick in Health [and] Physical Education, who's just been honored recently with a scholarship, I think for women's leadership. And Ann Griffiths, who's retired not long

ago, were two of the women that I learned from very early on in my career here. There were lots of people.

SM: Do you remember any major events or activities that happened while you were here? Any that really stick out in your mind?

RA: You know I was trying to think about that, I was looking at the question and I was thinking, “Gee, what was that?” I was so focused on what was happening on campus One, of course, was the passing of the bill creating the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. People don’t realize generally today, have no reason to, what a difference that made. Because before that there were 508 school districts, and there were fourteen of us [state universities] and we were all administered by the same people through the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and everything we did was treated as if we were another public school district. It was a real problem in terms of getting anything done.

The creation of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education freed us from all of that. It gave us our own board, it gave us a lot of autonomy to do things, it gave us our own entrée into the budget process. But as some of us said at the time, it eliminated a whole lot a bureaucracy but it put us in the position of creating our own. Unfortunately, that’s what organizations do over time. So unfortunately, we began to create our own bureaucracy.

I think that there were a number of issues around the country and on the campus in terms of some racial unrest. We had a couple of incidents that I think we worked through pretty well and got some favorable note for. So other than that I don’t know. That’s the only thing I can relate to you.

SM: Do you miss anything about being here? Teaching? Administration?

RA: Well, as I said, basically what I miss is the interaction with people. And when I went, after I retired, to two other presidencies and some other higher education work, it was primarily because of the interaction with people and the ability to work with people and with students and to try to make some things happen on some campuses that I found to be very interesting. And I miss that.

I never really developed a golfing hobby like a lot of people who say “I could spend half the day on the golf course.” But that’s kind of what I’ve been doing until just recently. I think I’m finally finished with that, but that’s been important to me.

SM: Well, do you have any words of wisdom for us or for any future or current Rock [community] members, students, that they should know?

RA: [Laughs]. Go to class and graduate. That's what a lot of students forget that they're here for. I mean, there's one job. There may be other jobs you'll be paid for, but there's one job [here] and that's go to class, study, and graduate.

I've used a quote at times; I have no idea where this came from. I've used this a lot, "Plant a tree in whose shade you shall never sit." It speaks [to] doing the things you can do today which will improve things for the future. I think that's what all of us do as we move through organizations.

You know how successful you are in the organization of education, probably years later, by what your students are doing. Too often we measure how successful we are by how many students graduate in four and a half, five and a half, six years. [That] has nothing to do with the success of what you've done as a faculty member. That success has to do with what people are doing later on. And I think one of the most pleasing things that can happen to anybody who has been in education for a while is when a former student approaches them and thanks them for whatever it was they did to help them through whatever it was—that class, however many years ago that was. And I think that's important.

I think we need to focus on what's important for students, what's important for the educational process, and spend less time on minor issues. There are these cyclical problems, Sarah. I'm sure that perhaps in your time there will be at least one discussion of parking, there will be some other discussion about library hours, there will be some discussion about why money isn't spent for this or that or another thing instead of what is being [done]. Why are we doing intramural fields when we could be giving students more scholarships? I mean, there are all kinds—but those things are cyclical and being here twenty-nine years, as I was, every now and then I would discover a problem sitting on my desk and I'd say, "Didn't we solve that?"

So, I guess my point is that there are things that are extremely important to get the job done [and] there are things which are ancillary to that and can be a little bit of a pain in the neck and we have to be careful where we focus our time. We have to be careful that we don't spend ninety percent of our time on ten percent of the problems, and that's easy to do in an institution of higher education where the spoken word is valued so highly and exercised so often. Okay?

SM: How do you want to be remembered here at Slippery Rock?

RA: Well, I think I always fancy myself as a person who is a facilitator who tries to identify those people and those things which are important to some objective and to try to help people get their part of that done. To try to manage in a way that people can accomplish what they need to accomplish to get our major objectives [done]. I'd like to have people feel that I listened to them. If they don't, then I've wasted a lot of time because I spent a lot of time listening. I think that to be a good teacher, to be a good administrator you have to listen. You have to pay attention to what people are saying.

I think with my background, people would say that I played by the rules. The rules aren't always the things that we like, but you can't have a successful organization if the rules aren't the same

for everybody, or if there are favorites and if there are people using what is commonly known as the "old boy system." I've experienced that; I've been in circumstances where that was rampant. But I would hope that no one saw that in me and I would hope I guess, that finally people would think that the things we did and the things that we accomplished, we did so with thought and

they were fair. You know if that's the case, that's fine.

SM: Well, I don't think I have any other questions for you. Do you have last comments or anything like that . . . ?

RA: I don't know, I think you pretty well covered most everything I had gone over with the questions. I think of one thing I didn't mention and it was on the top of my list: one of the things that I was most pleased about during the time I was here was the International Studies program and where it was going. The International Studies program was under the leadership of Stan Kendziorski. At one point we were sending overseas more than three hundred U.S. students a year, and many of us felt that one of the main purposes of International Student programs was to benefit *our* students, not necessarily to bring students from over there here but to get our students over there. I believe that any time a student spends in a different culture, even if it's as close as Great Britain in terms of culture, can be a life changing experience for them, and I've seen that.

So I think that was a critical issue. We were trying to reach one hundred countries, with students from that many countries. I don't think we made it; we came pretty close: probably seventy, eighty or so. But we were not trying to bring in what I call ghetto group recruiting of international students. Meaning, not to bring in one hundred students from one country and then say we've got a lot of international students. We had an excellent diversity.

The benefit here was that our international students also had an international experience when they were here. One election, the election when the Republicans under Newt Gingrich took over Washington D.C., that week I had a lunch with I think seventeen or eighteen international students from twelve or thirteen different countries and we had probably a two hour discussion about elections here and in their countries. I mean there were students there from all over the world, from the southern hemisphere into Asia and Europe; [it was] kind of a nice fall day, sitting in the dining hall, the University Club, in Slippery Rock talking about elections from all over the world. It was fascinating. So I think that was important.

I think that it hurt us when the Board of Governors decided international students were too expensive to support. We had always charged international students a fee. We showed that the

international students that we brought here, even though we “technically” waived tuition, brought with them more money than we spent on them.

Same thing with out-of-state students and that’s one of the changes I didn’t mention earlier. When I came here we probably had, I’ll bet a third of our student body was from out of state. When the Board of Governors decided they would crank the out-of-state tuition up in a hurry, we lost the biggest percentage of that number over two years. So I think that changed the student body again. I used to laugh that having students from New Jersey was as good as having international students. My wife was from New Jersey so I can say that. So those were a couple things that I didn’t mention.

The new student apartments, we got that set of student apartments built really over the objections of the powers-that-be in Harrisburg and one very strong local landlord who did everything he could to shoot them down.

SM: Do you know why he tried to shoot them down? Was there any particular reason?

RA: He had an interest in building student apartments—

SM: Oh, okay.

RA: —and we were building these on campus. So it was competitive, I believe. And that’s alright; it’s no problem being competitive. But we had to go through a struggle to get them, and I think that was important to the institution. It was very helpful in terms of then moving forward and to do what’s been done now in terms of student apartments.

The Alumni House, I think, was also an important thing that we did. So anyway, those are some of things and I appreciate, Sarah, your conversation. If you have any questions that you need answered from me or to fill things in, let me know.

SM: Okay. Thank you.