Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of SRU
Dr. William Behre
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JS: Good morning.

WB: Good morning.

JS: Today is June 15th, 2023. I'm here with Dr. Bill Behre, president of Slippery Rock University, for the Rock Voices Oral History Project. Thank you so much for being here.

WB: Pleasure.

JS: Okay. I'm Judy Silva, if I didn't say that. Let's start with some biographical information. Your full name; where you were born. . . .

WB: William John Behre. I was born on Long Island in Smithtown, New York, which is about halfway out on Long Island on the north shore. Graduated from high school there, Smithtown West, home of the Blue Knights. Not anymore, I think; I think they changed it.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: And I have a Bachelor's degree in Economics with a focus in Economic History from Vassar College. Master's degree in Special Education, focus on elementary years, from Hunter College at the City University of New York. And a Ph.D. in Education with a focus on Special Education Policy at the University of Michigan.

JS: Nice. All right. And your affiliation with SRU?

WB: I've been the president for almost five years. I'm a few weeks shy of five years right now.

JS: Wonderful.

WB: Yeah.

JS: All right. Has the structure of your department or area changed while you've been here? If so, how?

WB: Yeah. I mean, it's all my fault. I changed . . . our Cabinet is about twice the size of what it was when I arrived. When I arrived, we had a chief of staff, a director of communications, a VP for finance, an admin, and a provost. And essentially we had a chief operating officer model, where the provost was functionally the chief operating officer and almost everything reported to him. It's a perfectly reasonable model, just not one I was comfortable with. I prefer more voices around the table and more healthy discussion, frankly healthy disagreement around the table. Without adding a whole bunch of new positions, as the provost was transitioning out, the previous provost, I took some of his direct reports and just brought them to the Cabinet and made up the title of Chief Officer--the Chief Student Life Officer, Chief Enrollment Officer. I didn't backfill behind them, so it wasn't like we added a whole lot of administration, but we did add a lot of people, a lot of voices to the Cabinet.

JS: Mm-hmm. Wonderful. All right. And then number four, what were your impressions of SRU? How did they, or didn't they, change over time?

WB: This might be the toughest question.

JS: [Laughs]. I know.

WB: Because when you interview, everyone puts their best foot forward; they're selling you and you're selling them. SRU does a great job of saying, you know, “We're one big family.” There's an awful lot of Kumbaya language. But in truth, SRU is a lot like the rest of the world, and a lot like the rest of the country, it has its factions. It has people with personal agendas. And I don't know if that was shocking, but it is a difference. If the question is the difference between first impression and reality, the reality is it’s a lot less utopian than it seems when you first walk in.

JS: Interesting. [Pause]. All right. And then what were the pressing issues at the beginning of your presidency?

WB: Student mental health. First fourteen months of my presidency, we lost three students to suicide. And we lost another student--who actually was no longer a student, he'd withdrawn the previous semester but still lived among students--to suicide. We also had a hunting accident. So, it was a really challenging time. I think people's early experiences are incredibly formative.

If you look at investment here, to the dispassionate eye we probably overinvested in student mental health. If you really want to look at distribution of resources and things like that. But it's important to me to sleep at night. So, we added counselors. We had a very--again, I don't want to be critical--it's a very common system in higher ed of rationing counseling sessions. We don't do that anymore. It has created some backlog issues and things; it's not without its flaws. But one of the students we lost was known to us. The other ones were not; they were not known as--but one was known to us and that one haunts me because if he had access to just a couple more counseling sessions. . . . It just [pause], I still think about that. So, we've invested in the Counseling Center.

We've also invested, though, in the Dean of Students area that does important triage work. The way our counselors are structured, they're not there at midnight. It's not our design. But our triage system actually deputizes everyone on campus with our CARES reporting. I don't know if you know this, but in the post-pandemic period, we've averaged probably one mental health transport to the hospital a week.

JS: Wow!

WB: But the system has worked because we've not had a completed suicide in that whole period. And that's because students, staff and faculty have been educated, sometimes really subtly, about our CARE report system: what to look for, watch out for your friends. That's been ingrained. Honestly if I have a lasting legacy that--and I don't take credit for it, it's the staff who did it, but I funded it [laughs]. If I have a lasting legacy, that may be it: the fact that we had this flurry of just horror, just a terrible way to start anything. And we've come out of probably the most strenuous time in the history of our lifetime in humanity, and we didn't regress. We actually progressed.

JS: Yeah.

WB: So, that was the most pressing issue. I mean, there were budget issues. I'll extend a little bit. I think the most pressing issue today--you can almost look at the macro and the micro level. Mental health is still at the micro level. And I mean on a campus level, most pressing.

The most pressing issue for Slippery Rock today is the health of the System [Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education]. You have to view it as a train: if the first university goes off the cliff, we could be the caboose, but we're still going. That's just how it's structured because we are inherently linked. So it's very important to us to help those front cars be sustainable. It's enlightened self-interest [laughs]. And so, that's . . . leaving here, I'm gratified because I truly believe the only existential threat to Slippery Rock is something external to the university that I couldn't fix myself.

JS: Yeah, it's daunting, I will say. And what about COVID? We didn't talk about that but that was . . . on your watch, sir [laughs].

WB: You know, you don't get to plan your presidency.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: I mean, that's been the most humbling thing about COVID is--anyone in my role has to have a certain level of hubris. I mean, you just do. But COVID really--there's an old country song, it says "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans" [laughs].

JS: [Laughs].

WB: And COVID was just the way to remind us all of that. My crystal ball got really, really fuzzy during COVID. I guess very few people choose to be a wartime president, but you play the cards you're handed. And I think we played those cards as well as anyone could have.

JS: Yeah.

WB: I am very proud of that. To my knowledge, the only person who lost their job here during COVID was someone who was fully funded by a grant, and the grant stopped paying. There were some people who left on their own, but we repurposed people's positions. We had athletic coaches basically becoming success coaches and calling students and saying, "Hey, you haven't logged on; you haven't done this."

It was great for the students, but it was also, I think, a part of this community because we are mostly people. I mean, there's bricks and mortar, but you look at our budget, most of its people. You look at our success, it's people. Most of our people would be completely successful if they were sitting out in a trailer somewhere working. Because we've got fantastic professionals here. And if you don't let them know that they matter in a time of crisis, then why would they have loyalty when there's no crisis? Why would they stick around? And then of course, you would lose your best people because they're the ones who get jobs.

And so again, that was enlightened self-interest. I like to sleep at night, so I didn't want to cut off anyone's health benefits in the middle of a pandemic. And I know some presidents did, and I need to add this because I don't want to seem like I'm throwing other presidents of the System under the bus who had to do it. What they had to do pained them beyond belief. They're humans; no one wants to hand someone a pink slip. You don't even want to hand someone who you think *deserves* a pink slip a pink slip. And so, I'm fortunate that this institution--and I don't

take full credit for it; we've had years and years of good management--I'm fortunate that this institution wasn't painted into that corner. And I'm proud that we didn't paint ourselves into that corner.

JS: Yeah. [Pause]. Okay. What changes have you witnessed here, and were they for the better or worse?

WB: Well, I think COVID has changed us in ways we don't even know yet. Like everything, it's a double-edged sword. COVID has taught us that, sure, we can do some things at a distance. That extends our reach; extends, or possibly extends, who we can hire as faculty, all those kinds of things. It really does. But it's also convinced some people that you can do *everything* at a distance, or most things at a distance, and there's so much learning that goes on, not even between faculty and students, but faculty and faculty, through hallway interaction. And one thing I've noticed about Zoom interaction is you get your agenda done, but you don't get any of that additional learning done.

In my mind there's a connection here: when I was a kid, we had a set of encyclopedias, and I'd go look something up in the encyclopedia, but I would find six other things along the way.

JS: [Laughs]. Yep.

WB: And I think that's hallway conversation. You start one conversation, you land somewhere else. *That* you lose.

JS: Yeah.

WB: And that's why I personally am dead set against, “Well, all my courses are online. I shouldn't have to come into the office.” So, we've learned technology, some really good changes because of it. But I think we're still struggling with what's the balance coming out of it. And I don't think we know yet.

JS: I think about conferences that are now just via Zoom. You don't get any of that, talk about hallway interaction, you know?

WB: Well, I'll extend that analogue: the Board of Governors could be fully on Zoom. There's no reason why the Board of Governors has to travel to Harrisburg. But I will tell you, for me, the most important part of a Board of Governors meeting is the Wednesday evening, talking to the governors outside of the structured session. Because that's when you can explain to them, “Well, this is how a university really works.” And for some of them, I learned an awful lot because there are some who are elected officials. So, I've learned a lot about, “This is how the

legislature really works." That doesn't occur again on Zoom and an agenda; that occurs over dinner in the evenings. I do fear we're going to lose that.

I think other things that have changed is, our nation has gone through a long overdue awakening. When I interviewed Anthony Jones for the Chief Diversity Officer position, he said to me--because that was actually as the pandemic was ending--we were all masked at that point. He said to me, "You know, you're living through two pandemics right now." You have COVID and you have the issues of social justice that are emerging, that are rattling our culture, not quite as much as COVID, but almost. And that's changed, and that's for the good, but it's not without growing pains. It's also not without irony, and I'll tell you what I mean by that.

You might remember that at one point, soon after George Floyd was murdered, we had a video emerge of a transfer student who was using the N-word on video. My administration had serious discussions with our attorneys about what our options were. But, our First Amendment is a pesky thing. And it did not rise to any occasion that would merit any actual disciplinary reaction. Also, something the world doesn't know, but for posterity it's probably important to know because it also adds another issue with our current society that's really changed, and that is the power of social media. The young man who said that was drunk and he was 16 when he said it; he was 20 when he applied here. He had broken up with someone and that person wanted to ruin his life so put it out on social media.

JS: So, something from his past that came up?

WB: Yes.

JS: But during COVID, when we were all on Zoom, weren't there problems of like Zoom bombings?

WB: Yeah, there were some Zoom bombings. Yeah, there were. But that case, because now I want to make the point about that case. That case was interesting because I put out a statement about the First Amendment that, in retrospect, was tone deaf. It was correct factually, but it was tone deaf that it wasn't what the community wanted to hear. They wanted to hear, "Yes, this causes pain." And I was actually sort of on defense mode, and I was saying, "This is why I can't do anything."

But a few days later, after all that, we're walking--there was a march, the George Floyd-style memorial protest march, and it was from Thompson Field to the police station. And we get to the police station and its Slippery Rock, so over by the police station is the mayor and a bunch of police sort of lined up in blue. And the protesters are in a circle, sharing, like protesters do. And one of them looked at me and said, "I don't care about the First Amendment. You need to

expel the guy." By the way, he ultimately withdrew on his own. And one of our faculty went up and high fived him after that. I looked at that and I didn't challenge it because it wasn't the right moment. But the irony of that was hysterical, because we're standing in front of a lot of cops who are not bashing your head in while you're protesting police, protected by the First Amendment, saying the First Amendment doesn't matter. And then one of our Ph.D. faculty, who should know better; who, especially given issues of academic freedom in this country as well, who should know better, walks up and high fives the guy. Those kind of ironies have been what's driven me crazy about my presidency. It only happens a couple of times, but they're salient and they stick with you.

And so that irony is one I, obviously I'm talking about it--I'm two weeks out from leaving, and talking about it. It's one of things I choose to preserve because that's something I think higher ed has to grapple with. We need to be better than the discourse around us, and we're not always better than discourse. In fact, I think sometimes we care about winning more than we care about fact, even here. And some of the arguments I've heard from some of our leaders on campus, if it were written in a student essay with the level of data they used to support it, it would be a C-minus. That's been my frustration. So, thank you for the therapy session.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: But that is something I think Slippery Rock and all of higher ed has to grapple with. We need to be better than the discourse, and social media and all these other things drag us down. We need to be exemplars of reason and thoughtfulness. I fear we're not that.

JS: And that was the heat of the moment, I'm sure. But that person is still a faculty member, they're representing. We're always representing.

WB: Yeah. So.

JS: Okay, what changes have you witnessed--number seven is what campus activities have you led or been involved with?

WB: That's a hard one.

JS: Yeah. [Laughs].

WB: I want to say, "Everything." I have worked really, really hard to be active and visible in the community, on campus. I think I've been reasonably successful. Coming out of the pandemic I had a dilemma, because we were still masking and I felt like when I walked around, and people weren't being mask compliant, I needed to correct them all the time. So, I felt a little

bit like a middle school teacher, you know, "Fix your mask. Do this. Do that." And it actually did something damaging because for a period of time I sequestered myself, so I didn't have to deal with that. I think if I could do it over again, I wouldn't have done that because I think that was the time as we were coming out, where a little bit more presence would have been helpful. So, hindsight being 20/20, I would have done a little bit more walking around and just lived with having to remind people. But it got tiresome. It was just easier not to go into the Student Center because then I didn't have to do it. If I stayed *outside* of the Student Center, I was fine. So that was a challenge.

JS: Yeah. Okay. Other campus activities? I mean, I know you're the leader of everything, but things that maybe you were just. . . .

WB: Things I was drawn to. I love our sporting events. And it's not just because we were successful, but we were. The best part about going to a football game, because the football games were interesting because I had the president's tent, and that's where donors were. And so, I'd always start the day in the president's tent visiting with the donors, and I'd go back again at halftime. But I never spent the whole game in there, even in bad weather; I always went out. My favorite time was the season right before the pandemic. I'd spend the whole time with the marching band. What happens is that when they get used to you standing there, they start just talking, and then you actually hear about the student experience. And what I love about the marching band is, a lot of people think it's mostly music majors. It's actually not. It's a real cross-section of the campus.

JS: Such a great group of students.

WB: And so, that I love. The other thing I loved, pre-pandemic, we would rotate almost every student group through dinner at the house. I got to know all the teams. I got to know Rock Out. I got to know *The Rocket* staff. They all came through the house. That was a lot of fun.

I remember we did the football team and the marching band on the driveway. And the first year the marching band came, it happened to be on my birthday, and that was just a coincidence. But of course my wife let Jonathan Helmick know and so they played *Happy Birthday*. It was a hoot.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: Part of it is trying to demystify the role of the president, because you want people to have a conversation with you. That was the benefit of having dogs as well, because no one wants to talk to the president, they want to talk the president's dogs.

JS: Yep, for sure. Walking the dogs is a great way to meet people.

WB: So that was real important. In terms of activities . . . the other thing I liked is after the first year--the first year I did one of those very formal State of the University things. But one of my personal weaknesses is I don't like to do straight speeches. I don't feel good--I don't feel competent in it as much. I'd much rather do an open question and answer. So I converted it to question and answer after that. I truly loved doing that. I didn't mind the hard questions. I actually loved the hard questions because I think if a rift between Old Main and the rest of the campus occurs, it's because we in Old Main put up the wall. I really believe that. You hide behind your PowerPoint, and you say what you want to say and you curate the message. And I think it's really important not to curate the message. You're going to fall on your face sometimes; you're going to trip; you're going to say something that your phraseology is not going to be what you wanted and you're going say, "Aw, did that come out of my mouth?" Those things are going to happen, but you're also going to answer the questions that people actually have. When you just do a speech you anticipate the questions, or you avoid the questions, and you curate your message. And I love the uncurated; I really enjoyed it. And I left feeling like, "You can disagree with me, but you can't say I'm being duplicitous." The two things I really never want people to think is I'm being duplicitous or being capricious. So just being able to lay out your data, your thought, your information, get people to disagree with where you got, and they might even disagree with some of your assumptions, but at least they understand how you got to where you got. And that's a different thing because you can trust someone you disagree with. You can't trust someone who you think is faking it.

JS: Right. And for most people, that's the only opportunity *ever* to interact with you.

WB: Yeah. Well, remember I used to do my Friday mornings where people could do that. I think there were half hour slots.

JS: Did people come?

WB: Yeah, but the problem is, by semester three, the same people came all the time.

JS: Yeah. Yeah.

WB: Early on, people came, "Hey, I want you to know what we're doing." I had some students come to say, "I just want to see the president." We would just talk.

JS: It's a great idea.

WB: But as I said, by the third semester, it was the same people, honestly, with the same gripes. At that point, you just want to say, “I heard you.” I made a deal with Cabinet members: I felt the need that I would make no promises while sitting in those sessions because in truth, I was skirting, sort of, proper chain of command. I was also still relatively new, because there may be valid reasons why we weren't doing what the person said we were doing, and I just didn't know the history. And in some cases, I didn't know the law. So I made a deal that I would go back to the Cabinet every time. And people would come back the second time and say, “Well, I told you and you didn't do anything about it.” And my answer had to be, “Well, we considered it. We chose not to do it, which is a different thing than ignoring you.” And so, by the time you have that second conversation, when they come in for the third one . . .

JS: [Laughs].

WB: . . . then there’s a diminishing return.

JS: Yeah.

WB: So, I don't regret doing it, but I'm also okay with the fact that, post-pandemic, I just didn't go back to it.

JS: Yeah. And that's scary for some people to show up and talk to you one on one. So . . .

WB: Yeah. Yeah.

WB: And I didn't bite a single one [laughs].

JS: [Laughs]. You haven’t bitten anybody here, as far as I know. No one's been bitten.

WB: Yeah. Well, there are a few folks who might suggest they have been, but. . . .

JS: Okay, I see. So, signature accomplishments of your presidency, you talked about mental health.

WB: I think where we got there is good. I think getting us through the pandemic . . . we don't know for sure what the freshman class is going to look like next year, but numbers suggest it's going to look much more like 2019 than anything during the pandemic. In fact, if the class froze today, we would be doing a little bit better than 2019 I think.

JS: Great.

WB: But it's not going to, we'll have some melting and things like that. I think we're going to be about 1500 first year students next year. And I think at the nadir we were thirteen and change; and those students, those small classes are still working their way through, so you're going to see budget pressures for the next couple of years as we replace.

But when I made the decision not to seek renewal of my contract, I really did it for two reasons. One was a very personal reason: my wife is her mom's only child, and coming out of the pandemic, she just seemed older. And I lost my mom during the pandemic. So, there was some raw emotion still around that. My mom actually died in New York in the first wave of the pandemic.

JS: Oh, my gosh.

WB: And so, my wife and I had talked about needing to get closer to her mother. She'd had a couple of medical emergencies and Leah would have to get in the car and drive ten hours and not know what was going on at the other end. So, that weighed on it; that was the personal.

The professional was: I didn't get to do most of the things I laid out in my inauguration speech. I mean, I had big plans. We were going to do this. We were going to go that way. We were going to do this. If I were to try to accomplish those, I would have had to commit to probably almost a full, second, five-year contract. And I never wanted to work beyond sixty and I knew that. So, I just said the more responsible thing to do is to not try to get something started and hand it off mid-way, but hand it, so the circuitous way of answering your question, which I guess is my style . . .

JS: [Laughs].

WB: . . . I sometimes wonder about legacy because the things I laid out were--I didn't achieve most of those. If you look at . . . now, there were mitigating factors!

JS: Yes! [Laughs].

WB: There were mitigating factors. But when you think about legacy, you say, “Okay, what did I set out to do, and did I achieve it?” We shored up our mental health. We got through the pandemic, and we're going to come out and we're going to look pretty much the same as we were before the pandemic.

JS: That’s huge.

WB: It is. I'm not minimizing it. But if you would have asked me on day one, it's not where I would have been. I think the other thing we did . . . I guess there are a couple of things that we did—Rita Abent, rest her soul, used to say, "You don't see my best work." It's the fixer stuff; it's the things. . . .

I entered here at this time of massive program growth. I think under Cheryl [Norton] and Phillip [Way], twenty-five new programs in five years--I'm probably wrong specifically, but something along that magnitude. And most of those--again, no fault of theirs because it takes time--were incomplete in terms of staffing, accreditations and all those kinds of things. And we shored those up. Under my administration, a few of them aren't going to survive. They just were not the right idea at the right time for us. But most of them, we got the accreditations, we staffed them, and we have our first graduates.

Probably the one that I think about the most because of some of the tempest in a teapot controversy around it is Engineering. We had our first civil and mechanical engineering graduates this past May. And based on the survey that they do for John Rindy's office [Center for Career and Academic Progress], which is imperfect data because students who don't have jobs tend not to fill those things out, but the department actually tracks them too. John's data is actually pretty good compared to what the department does. So, there are a few students who didn't say anything, who didn't fill out John's survey, who are still searching for jobs (from the department), but from the students who filled out John's survey, which is the majority of them: the vast majority are employed, I think like six were not employed, something like that. The highest salary was $100K with a bachelor's degree. The mean was about $66K, and the highest signing bonus was $20,000. I understand salary is not everything, but it's a pretty good indicator of the value of the graduates to the community.

And so, what did we do there? We went through about seventeen iterations of what it's going to look like, and I understand that caused some confusion. But each time we changed it, we made it less expensive for the institution while retaining quality. I know there are those doubters who said, "You never can retain quality by being less expensive." I think we've shown we did. Again, I'll credit the faculty. The faculty showed great flexibility. They also showed great creativity by helping to design labs that--there are people who argued we needed a $30 million building. We'll spend about seven million total--probably six and change, seven is probably an overstatement--on labs and equipment. And the faculty helped design that, and they helped figure this out, and they basically made it state of the art. So now, we are the most affordable way for a working class kid to become an engineer. And talk about changing the trajectory of someone's life.

JS: Yeah.

WB: But that's a legacy that someone has to point out, because really what it means is we're functioning well [laughs]. You don't get credit for keeping the train on the tracks, so that's an important one.

I think the other legacy is, and people give me too much credit for this, the people who think about it. Everyone always says, “Well, the best thing you ever did was keep us out of the merger with Edinboro. And I think the mascot of Scotch on the Rocks would have been great.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: But the truth is, I did not give anyone a hard “No” on that. I laid out conditions that would have to be fulfilled for Slippery Rock to enter this thing without having a gun to our head. And there were only three. Number one is we could not absorb the debt, and they’re still struggling with that today. There needed to be an outside force that removes a lot of Edinboro’s debt because that would have destroyed Slippery Rock, and I wasn't willing to do that. The second was good people were going to have to work themselves out of a job. And so, we had to have some kind of a safety net. I just was not going to look someone in the eye, ask them to come and work hard every day, and then at the end hand them a pink slip, without some kind of structure. And the third one was, everyone had to admit publicly that we were the senior partner. I was not going to pretend that this was a merger of equals.

JS: Right.

WB: Because what it really would have been, and honestly probably what it should have been, was a takeover. We were functioning very well. They were functioning *not* very well. That's being kind.

Those ultimately became unacceptable. A fair criticism is I can be harsh and blunt at certain times. And I was harsh and blunt, and I probably was off putting to people. So there's probably personality reasons [about] me that we didn't get there. I'm perfectly content that it didn't happen.

JS: I'm so *glad* it didn’t happen.

WB: I'm perfectly content. But I will not take credit for--I think some people think I marched into the Chancellor's office, slammed books down and said, “There's no way we're doing this.” I laid out our parameters and everyone decided to go in a different direction. And I'm perfectly content with that.

JS: Thank goodness.

WB: Yeah.

JS: Thank you. Thank *you*!

WB: Yeah, but again, I never said "No." I just said, "These are the conditions." So, when people say, "Well, you have the credit for keeping us out," I just have the credit for putting what I thought were very realistic conditions down.

JS: You guided us through.

WB: And people went in another direction. And I'm thrilled that people went another direction. I'd always thought that if it happened, I would have worked for two years at the merger and then would have had to resign because in order to do it right, you have to waste all the good will that you've ever built with anyone. I was prepared for that.

It's funny, thinking about that is when I realized I could afford to retire, which is when I ultimately retired, it was not a strain. Because I really looked at it and said, "There's no way that you don't waste all the good will you ever built forcing departments to get to--I mean, you've seen it play out. But there's no way that a leader can get through that and do the job. I mean, some people, they stay out of the fray. But if you're doing the job what you're doing is, is doing your best to set the next leader up for success so the next leader can come up and be the healer, because you've been the 'wound-er.'

JS: Wow.

WB: Again, I was prepared to do that if need be. I'm thrilled it never happened, but we were prepared to, so I'll take credit for how I managed it. But I will not take credit for keeping us out.

JS: So besides it being less chaotic as a result of not doing that, do you agree that it's much better that we are just who we are?

WB: Yes. Yeah, yeah. I'm actually to the point now where I'm not sure building the System in the '80s wasn't a mistake. I understand the efficiencies, I really do. But . . . linking schools that on one level are inherently competing with each other, to each other's financial survival creates challenges. It really does. Because we need PennWest to survive, but we also want their students. And those are both fair and honest realities. I'm not sure that the System--I also think that just the way the schools evolved, because they emerged organically in their communities. There was no planning about geographic distribution, none of that. And then you lay on the, I think, wanton growth of the Penn State Commonwealth campuses. There's been no sort of

master planning. Even in the good times, we didn't need all those schools. And surely now in a demographic crunch, we don't need them all. But functionally they're not going to close because of the politics behind it.

JS: What about dissolving the State System instead of merging campuses?

WB: I'd be fine with that.

JS: Would that have made more sense?

WB: But here's the thing. What doesn't make sense is the fact that we have four northern tier schools; and they added a community college at Edinboro.

JS: That's not where the population is.

WB: It makes zero sense. But I do not believe there's the legislative courage to close schools, and maybe for good reason because it would devastate those communities. But then maybe Clarion needs economic development dollars to shore it up, not education dollars. Because if a factory were leaving the region, they might get some--usually in the form of tax breaks--but they would get revenue from the Commonwealth to keep the factory there. Factory wants to move to New York. “No, stay here. We'll do this for you; we’ll do this for you.” Why aren't we doing something like that for Lock Haven, for Clarion, where we understand that we may not need the seat capacity for students, but we sure as heck need them as the engines for these small communities, and spend the money that way.

In some ways--they're not doing it, they're not calling it that--but I don't know if you've seen the bill that passed the House, but it is a very substantial increase to our base, which would be great for us: 6% would be fantastic. But it also has $30 million to start paying down the debt of those schools. Let's hope it gets to the Senate and to the Governor. But if that occurs, it's not the economic development money I'm talking about, but it is saying, “Okay, we need a separate pool of money to shore up these places.” Because they're suffering from decisions made generations ago by presidents who at the worst, were seeing the future demographics with rose-colored glasses. But at best were saying, “We're living in a boom time,” because remember the System's been existing in primarily growth and boom times. There are colleges out there that have lazy rivers and all this kind of stuff. They're trying to keep up because 17 year-olds shop with their eyes.

JS: Very interesting. All right. I believe we're number nine. [Sneeze]. Bless you. Who are other campus leaders while you've been here, and what are some of your impressions of them?

WB: There are leaders in a couple of ways. There are official leaders, and there's the obvious: deans . . .but those leaders report to me. So in some ways, they're not the ones I have to negotiate with, if you know what I mean. Our faculty union leaders are probably the other set of official, I mean I've got other unions, but the faculty union's the most prominent in terms of face time and issues that are really central to what the institution is. I've been blessed with both Ben [Shaevitz] and Jason [Hilton], who have been partners. One of the things--I've spent more time with Jason than Ben--one of the things I've loved about working with Jason is, we try problem solving. We sometimes have to bicker, but it's almost scripted for us: the positions we have to take. There's an old cartoon, one of the I guess Hanna-Barbera *Bugs Bunny*, where in the morning, the sheep dog and the wolf show up with their lunch buckets, and they punch in, and they have a cup of coffee together. Then they go out and they bicker, then they punch out and have a cup of coffee together.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: In some ways that's how the union relationship has to be. They've just been great partners, and that's been fantastic.

There are also the unofficial leaders, the thought leaders for different communities in different areas, and you see them emerging in all the different president's commissions and things like that. That has sometimes been less productive because there I think, at our worst, we've gotten into wanting to win the argument rather than solve the problem. I'll own a piece of that too, because every interaction is two people [laughs], or two entities. And so that has been a little bit less effective. Again, sometimes frustrating to me, really frustrating to me. But as I said, I'll probably spend the next six months debriefing this, and I'll probably figure out a few spots where I could have handled it better as well.

Sometimes those relationships are great, and sometimes they were just--almost felt like the president was being put to the test on a regular basis. "Let's say this and see what he's going to say. Let's see what he's going to do. Let's see if we can catch him." There was some of that going on, at least I felt it that way.

JS: What about silent, behind the scenes people who make things happen that a lot of people don't even know who they are?

WB: Well, the truth is, for a good chunk of my presidency, I didn't know who some of them were, and I probably still don't know who some of them are. Because they are that good and that silent.

Let's talk about where something worked, and that was post-George Floyd, PCRED [the President's Commission on Race and Ethnic Diversity]. Leaders emerged there who I didn't know from a hole in the wall. Emily McClaine, Monique Alexander, and I don't think I'd ever met Ed Scott before that. He's an Accounting faculty member. I asked them to do work with the police, for example, to try to look at what are our policies; how can we adjust them? What are the things that we're still working on?

We finally are legally able to put body cameras on our police. We weren't before; there was just a legislative change a year ago. We could put body cameras on, but we couldn't turn the sound on because that was considered an illegal recording, because you need people's permission to record. Because our police were not under the same, they weren't certified under the same statute as municipal police. So they were left out of that ability. That's been fixed. So now we'll have police cams. Right now, Chief Sharkey has applied for a grant for them. But if he doesn't get the grant, we're going to buy them. We're holding off to see if--because it's a six-figure grant--if it can come in. But in the relatively near future, we'll have cameras. Part of that emerged from the discussion between PCRED, Chief Sharkey, and the police, where everyone really wanted them because of course, many of our police want them as well, because it also protects them from false accusation. And so, things like that that emerged: policy tweaks. We decided to get our police force accredited as a direct result of that work. And so, there were leaders who now are on my radar. But before that happened, I knew who they *were*. But I don't know that I'd ever had full sentence conversations with them. The challenge is, I don't know who else is out there like that, but those leaders really stepped up in ways I'm not sure that they realized they were going to have to do as well.

Then there are student leaders, and student leaders are often not the elected folks at SGA. Fifteen percent of our student body votes, or something like that? Probably the greatest example of that is someone like Brooklyn Graham. I think the world of Brooklyn. If she needed to be, and it worked out, I'd adopt her, adopt the young woman. She's just amazing.

We actually--our first interaction was a massive disagreement on social media. When I wrote my First Amendment piece, she was one of the most negative reactions to it, and she was out all over social media, ripping me a new one. But what I appreciate about Brooklyn once we actually met face to face: she likes to think. And I think we still disagree on some of the points I made. But she's probably one of the top five students I've ever worked with, she's just so thoughtful. And she is an *incredible* opinion leader amongst her peers.

JS: I believe it.

WB: I would often say to Brooklyn, "I'm thinking about this. What do you think the reaction will be?" And we became . . . if there wasn't the age and power differential, I would say we

became friends. But I think someday we'll be friends; I think right now it's still some distance. I actually said this to someone recently: I became a mentor for her around grad school and she mentored me in so many ways to think about things from a different perspective. And so, there are other opinion leaders like that, but Brooklyn's, you know, once in a lifetime.

JS: I love that appreciation that it's a two-way street. We learn. . . .

WB: Yeah, yeah.

JS: All right. Number ten, are there others who influenced you or were significant to the institution while you've been here?

WB: I can't get through this without doing some kind of shout out to Rita Abent. Rita was so much more than her job description. She was the person I'd walk in to and say, "I'm thinking about this," whether it was in her realm or not. And she'd say, "You really want to do that?" She was that critical friend that every leader needs. And I don't think it's coincidental that when I did make some substantial public relations errors around George Floyd, was when she was in the hospital. I don't think that that's, in retrospect, I don't think that's coincidental. I think that Rita would have taken that message I sent out and said, "Wow, this is interesting. You're right. Now put it in your drawer."

I think leaders discount the value of critical friends. There were several people on the Cabinet who were quite willing to walk into my office and say, "I'll do it if it's what you really want, but this is the implication of what you're about to do." And that's again, I think something I'm proud of is, I don't think there's a Cabinet member that exists today who doesn't trust that they can come into my office, tell me that they disagree and walk out unscathed. That wasn't always true, but it is today with the chemistry of this group and where we are. We've hit a really good spot.

But I miss Rita regularly because she was one of the wisest people I knew. I know she could be gruff, and I know that some people were afraid of her. But, you know, ultimately I respect smart and she was really smart.

JS: Yeah, I liked Rita.

WB: Yeah. Yeah.

JS: Okay. What noteworthy events or activities have taken place while you've been here?

WB: I think we've [laughs] . . . we've kind of covered it.

JS: Academic, cultural, enrollment. . . .

WB: The pandemic has to be mentioned. The other one is--because I don't think it's going to go away--it feels insignificant now because it occurred before the pandemic, and the pandemic changed your perspective on everything, or my perspective on everything. You remember our visit from Kent State Gun Girl?

JS: No.

WB: Our representative at the time, Aaron Bernstein, and our beloved mayor, along with the College Republicans, had a discussion--it was really more of a rally on campus--to encourage us to change our policies, to encourage people to carry on campus.

JS: Yeah. Yeah.

WB: And they brought in Kent State Gun Girl, I forgot her real name [Kaitlin Bennett], but she, at her graduation, posed with a rifle in front of Kent State's sign. She has her notoriety on the Internet. Our students were great. At the time, the staff of *The Rocket* did just an extraordinary job of reporting it and I appreciated their editorials.

But she dog whistled her followers to harass *The Rocket* to the point where one person was afraid to go home. One of the students we lost to suicide was supposed to be the editor of *The Rocket,* Adam Zook, then clearly he passed and he couldn't, so, Hannah Shumsky, who is a fine young woman but who woke up one day and was the editor of this newspaper. She was helping to navigate that. Just all this stuff was going on. Actually, that might have been right before Hannah became--I might be confounding some thing, that might have been right before Hannah. Adam might have still been alive. I remember when they published their final issue that year, we had to have police kind of wandering around the building just to make sure. I went and hung in their offices while they were doing their final edit, just a sort of symbolic thing.

So, we have that cultural phenomenon on top of everything else, and that's not going to go away. Every time there's a school shooting, everyone says, “Arm everyone on the campus.” Now, what do we know about guns? We know that most people who are wounded or killed by guns know their assailant. It's not these random shootings from off campus. I know that several of the deaths that occurred with students on this campus were involved with guns. And I just don't think it's a good idea to mix late adolescents, and all the angst of late adolescence, with an awful lot of alcohol, and drugs, and weapons. I don't see what good comes of it. I really don't. I'm not a huge anti-gun guy. I don't own guns right now. Once we had kids, I made a decision not to have guns in the house, but I grew up target shooting. I have no issue with hunters, things like that. I wonder why anyone needs an AR-15, but I have no issue with, sort of generic gun

ownership. But this is not the right context for it. So, I think that's another phenomenon we haven't talked about that still we struggle with and we will be struggling through for much longer.

JS: Yeah. [Pause]. Are there other events or memories you'd like to share?

WB: I think I hit the big ones because I've been giving pretty open-ended answers here. It's been mostly good. Where I haven't enjoyed it is those irony moments that I talked about before. But I'm hoping that as memories work, those will fade and that the happy times. . . . Knowing that roughly 30% of the people walk across the stage at commencement are first generation, I don't have a specific memory about it, but it is one of the most satisfying parts of this job. And I'll miss that. I'll miss the students terribly. I won't miss the day-to-day grind. Stress does have an effect on people, has had its effect on me. I won't mind not having that day-to-day level of stress.

JS: I can't imagine.

WB: Particularly the pandemic, what you had--what I had, I'll speak personally--was just the decision fatigue. Before the pandemic I could honestly say--actually no, before I arrived here--I could honestly say, "It's a higher ed decision. Nobody's going to die." And then you have the spate of suicides, and then you have the pandemic, and all of a sudden everything went out of proportion the other direction, because everything felt like a life and death decision, even when it wasn't. I won't miss that part at all.

JS: Any personal memories living in the president's house, your family, your lovely wife.

WB: There's one I want to have for posterity, and that is about my lovely wife. She more than me, has walked our dogs on this campus. And more than once she's walked past a tour and the tour guide will say, "And those are the president's dogs." [Laughter]. Just to show you how salient the dogs are, "And those are the president's dogs." [Laughs].

JS: [Laughs]. "And his wife!"

WB: That wouldn't even make it. She'd come home--she fortunately has a great sense of humor, so she got a kick out of it. But that's funny. It's things like that. It's little things. I loved having the students over. And when *The Rocket* came, and again, it's funny how things. . . . Adam Zook was there and he did a little video reporting of *The Rocket's* visit with the president, so he would have his camera out for a little bit. We had dinner and things, and they're the only group I brought up to the residence part of it, upstairs.

JS: Huh.

WB: I said, “You want to see behind the curtain?” And we went upstairs and I showed them where we live. But I was downstairs and I just said something that--I like word play, I always have. And so I said, “This is the kitchen. This is where we kitch.”

JS: [Laughs].

WB: And I have no idea what that means, but they got a kick out of that. They just thought that was one of the funniest things. And Adam eventually published a little video of *The Rocket* visit to the president's house, and that was one of the lines that made . . . those kind of informal things, the things where you can have some fun and be playful with it.

I got to do one just this semester. One of the fraternities was doing a telethon on our internal TV station for a children's charity, and the guy who was running it, James Cressman . . .

JS: Oh, I know James.

WB: . . . was in his office. James decided he wanted to try to recreate an old Letterman sketch. Letterman did a sketch with Zsa Zsa Gabor where he went around and ate fast food with Zsa Zsa. . . .

JS: [Laughing].

WB: We went to McDonald's, we went to Ginger Hill, and we went to Weisenfluh, and Domino's. James works at Domino’s.

JS: He works at Domino’s, yeah.

WB: I actually made a pizza at Domino's, and then delivered it, and decided to bring it to Shawn Lutz.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: So we made pizza and delivered it, and he ended up editing it so it was just my time at Domino's, and we framed it as an apprenticeship for my next job.

JS: [Laughs]. He’s so creative.

WB: And it was just, it was just cute. It was fun. We spent the whole afternoon together and we laughed. And these are . . . and Avery, I'm forgetting Avery's last name, she graduated this year, but she was our videographer. And we just, we had a hoot; it was informal. It's those things that are going to last, those little moments that are going to last.

Then the people you run into. We had a football player named Wes Hills, he was a running back my first year. He's actually playing in the USFL now, trying to get back into the NFL. He spent one season in the NFL and then went out west. Was a one-year transfer from Delaware. And he shows up in my office after the season, because he was just going to be here for that semester, and just says, "Just to say 'thank you' for the opportunity." It's those things that I hope stick with me, and not the frustrations.

JS: Yeah, hold on to that.

WB: Yeah. But most of the things that I put in that category are more micro-moments. I don't know that there are any grand moments where [pause] I stood at a podium, or I stood in front of a crowd. It's all the micro-moments. The reasons why we do our job are rarely events in an auditorium.

JS: Yeah. The human element.

WB: Yeah. I think the one event in an auditorium that I'm most proud of is when Cornel West and Robert George came to campus. I thought that was--it may have been the best discussion in an academic environment I've ever seen.

JS: It was a big deal.

WB: Yeah. And I'm hoping that that and some of the other ones we've done could, again, one of the things I would have done if I had a real presidency, is there would be a branded art and lecture series here.

JS: Yes!

WB: We have the facility. We also have a downtown that really struggles to survive the summer. So, if it was a 12-month thing with some emphasis on highlighting our own artists, bringing in artists from Pittsburgh over the summer, you could get some more traffic in the town which would help businesses sustain. Because you can get a tattoo in this town, you can vape, you can get your hair done.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: There's really not much else you can do. I've always thought that we could be a better partner downtown by drawing people in. I don't know that we have to go into any revitalization or this or that, but if we could draw people in. That was one of the first-year goals that just, for obvious reasons, it went by the wayside. But I'd love to see us have a branded art and lecture series.

JS: I love that idea; we'll call it the Bill Behre Arts and Lecture series.

WB: I don't quite have the money for it, you'll probably have to call it the PNC Art and Lecture Series, something like that. But something along those lines.

JS: [Laughs]. That's nice. All right. What, if anything, were you miss about being at SRU?

WB: Those micro-moments. The people. I'm to a point now where I don't know what my next step is going to be. I've had some conversations about interim presidencies and none of them have panned out in a way . . . the last one, when I realized it wasn't going to pan out, I will tell you, the first emotional response was relief. I need a break. So, I'm kind of glad things didn't work out, because I probably would have taken it and then I probably would have regretted it. [Laughs]. But I'm not seeking, and I don't think I'll ever seek again, this level of organizational responsibility. I won't miss that. I won't miss the power. Leah went to a session of AASCU [American Association of State Colleges & Universities] when I first became president, we both went to, there's one AASCU conference that does spousal education as well. And they talked about, there were spouses of retired presidents, mostly wives, and they talked about their spouses' adjustment to retirement. How they were used to being staffed, so to speak.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: They were treating their spouses, you know, and I don't think I'm going to fall into that phenomenon. I really don't think I'm going to miss the power, so to speak. I'll miss people, and I'll miss the ability--I guess this is a piece of power--I'll miss the ability to fix things for people at an individual level. If there's a student who I think is being treated poorly here, I make a phone call--now, I might be wrong--but I make a phone call, at least it gets attention. It's going to be strange to not be able to pick up the phone and help fix something, because I'm going to have no juice.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: That, I think, is going to be a real adjustment for me. But only, again, at that micro level. I don't care about telling this department to do that. I'm actually relieved not to have to do that.

But just at that micro level, when someone you see is struggling in this environment, I can actually make a difference.

JS: Yeah.

WB: And I think I'm going to feel a little declawed.

JS: [Laughs].

WB: And so, I'll miss that.

JS: I skipped over one inadvertently here. If you want to talk more about the campus climate, fine. But what advice will you give your successor?

WB: [Pause] that's a hard one because I think everyone has to come in and make their own path.

JS: She at least gets the benefit of, you know. . . .

WB: We spent some time together and I'm trying to think of what I *have* said to her. I think [pause] that's truly harder for me than you would imagine, because I should be able to rattle things off. But she's going to find her own way. And I think she has to find those voices who she trusts, who disagree with her. I think that's just good leadership. And engage those voices thoughtfully.

One of the things I fell into early on was, I'll call it *falling for the sob story* without really understanding how we got to that point. Because sometimes you see things and they really look curious. But without understanding: why are we doing it that way? Or why did this happen to that person?

We've had a few issues on campus, and I'll speak generically about them, where we've had students present themselves as *I have been harmed*. And then we find out--I'll speak more specifically--we had a student who had spread the narrative that she was homeless, and to the point where there were folks who were taking up collections for her. She was homeless because she decided not to live in the residence hall because she decided she didn't want a student loan. So, for a little while, I only had half that story. So, I was running around saying, "How could someone be living in their car on our campus? This is a big injustice. We have to get them a space." And then I found out that she actually voluntarily withdrew from that. And I guess some students don't want to have student debt, but, I want to be seven foot tall and center for the Knicks [laughs.]

JJ: [Laughs].

WB: And so this student was actually homeless by choice. I think she was troubled as well. I think there were a couple of things. We did eventually at least offer her some mental health services. But I would advise Karen [Riley] to get the whole story around these kinds of things, because it's easy to react emotionally. It's also easy again, because I've got power over our structures, to say, "I want to change a structure. I want to do this; I want to do that." And you need to engender among the people who work around you the comfort to say, "Yeah, I can do that. But, you know, we already have a policy, and we already do this and we already do that."

I had another one and this is a *good* story. Meghan, [a student] who graduated this year. She grew up in the foster care system. We were her fourth school and she came to see me because she saw some gaps in our ability to serve students who are from the foster [system], and we kind of extended this to students who were homeless, because they had a lot of overlap. She did say to me, first thing she said is, "This is the best place I've ever been. You need to know that. But this is where your gaps are." And it ended up that for most of our gaps, we actually had the services. We just didn't have them accessible in a single spot where you could find them. And so, the biggest change Megan helped me make was to work with Dave Wilmes to say, "Okay, let's get a website. Let's make this more searchable; let's figure this out." But you can imagine my first conversation with Dave, I was a little bent out of shape for students. "Dave, why aren't we doing this for students? I got a student here. We're not doing it." And Dave is wonderfully calm. He takes a deep breath and says, "We have that, it's over here. We have that, it's over here." So, the problem was a different one than Megan thought, or I thought initially. But you need to engender enough comfort amongst your staff to have them be able to say that in a way you can hear it and be productive.

I remember early on, I don't remember the specifics of it, but I remember it happened. I have a habit of thinking out loud. I riff in front of people. And one Cabinet member left the meeting thinking that this riff was a series of presidential demands and started to try to implement them. But at that point in our personal history, we hadn't built the trust where he could turn around and say, "This isn't going to work here. This isn't right." So, he actually started to go down the road in implementing things that made no sense for Slippery Rock. And so, it's important to engender that willingness for someone to say, "I think you're wrong." So that would be my advice to her. And frankly, it's almost trite because she's a successful leader; she probably knows that already.

And, you know, community specific? One of the things I've struggled with and I don't consider myself successful at this--I hope she does a better job--is bridging the vast political differences of many members of our community on campus and many members of our community off

campus. I have not been able to straddle that well at all. And I think, again, there's actually a pandemic effect because I lost patience during that. And a president really can't afford to lose patience like that, if I'm being honest. It was probably a mistake for me to be as vocal about a few things as I was. But it's where we were as a society, and I'll live with what I did.

JS: Okay. Words of wisdom. Are there other things you would like for current or future Rock community members to know?

WB: I'd like them to be cognizant of where we all started this, and that is that we need to be better than the political discourse around us, and we're not. In fact, some of the most hurtful hits I took were from the extreme left, because the extreme left is just as intolerant as the extreme right. It's just most of us tend to agree with them so we don't notice it [laughs]. I think is was Martin Luther King Jr. who said, "It wasn't so much the words of my enemies as the silence of my friends." I would say it was some of the words of my friends too [laughs]. I think that would be my lasting advice to this community is, "You need to not only model better behavior for our students and for each other, but you need to live it because we're supposed to be better." Isn't that the promise of higher education? The promise of data-based and philosophy-based reasoning? We're supposed to somehow transcend the mud, and we don't. We have not been successful in that, particularly in the post-pandemic, particularly post-George Floyd era. We have not.

And I think in the next year, year or two, we're going to have a similar reckoning around sexuality and trans issues as we've had around George Floyd. It's going to get worse before it gets better. My theory is it's the death rattle of the extreme right. They're just trying to take down anything they possibly can. But I don't have quite an equal fear, but I have fear of the extreme left as well. Extremism in either way is, I think, dangerous or damaging. And I don't think that we are willing . . . it's where the right is correct: we're not willing to check the extreme left, the way we're willing to check the extreme right on college campuses. I consider myself left of center, but I'm not extreme. And we have to be better. We can't get into the partisan mudslinging. If the next presidential election is what I think it's going to be. We have to model. We have to do what Robert George and Cornel West did. They showed us how two people who could disagree fundamentally on things, one, can recognize where they have common ground, and two, could disagree in that civil and thoughtful manner that matters. The essayist Robert Fulghum, he wrote *Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.*

JS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

WB: In the book that contains that there's this essay where he makes a claim, and I have no idea if it's technically true, but it's poetically true. The claim he makes is that if you were to line

up every person, he says, “According to anthropologists and geneticists, if you line up every person on earth who's ever lived, and you compare them to any other species, they're more alike than they are different.” Almost definitionally. He wrote at the height of the Cold War. He talked about a Russian soldier who was in one of the Russian incursions into Africa and was trapped, and his wife was killed and he refused to leave her and was captured, and he ended up dying. And the point of both these things was that our humanity transcends who we are. Our humanity transcends our politics, our nationality, these kind of things. And when we get into this bickering, we forget that. I'm guilty of it, too. I don't put myself above this, but *we're supposed to be better here*. That's the promise of higher ed. If we really want to say we are the beacon at a time when we're getting questioned left and right, we need to be better. Our biggest mistake is when we make our critics correct. I think we do that sometimes.

JS: Um-hmm. Well, the last question is, how would you like to be remembered?

WB: I'd like to be remembered as the guy who made the best of a really bad situation. And who tried to lead with decency. Yeah. And the mechanical stuff, yeah--our coffers are bigger today than when I got here. All that stuff. But is it Maya Angelou who said, “People forget what you said to them but remember how you made them feel.”

WB: I'd like that to be my legacy. We came through this thing *scarred*, but standing. I played the hand of cards as best I could, and I think it worked out well. I’d like to be remembered that way.

JS: Yeah, I agree with that. Thank you so much.

WB: Thanks. My pleasure.