Warren:  This is Mame Warren. Today is the twenty-first of July, 1999. I’m in Baltimore, Maryland, with Franklin Knight, who has been a member of the history department here at Johns Hopkins for quite a while. What brought you to Hopkins? Why did you decide to come here?

Knight:  Well, I came here reluctantly. I was invited here in 1969 for the first time, and I thought that it was too challenging for me then to live south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and I made a statement which in retrospect was rather fatuous, that I wouldn’t live south of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. This startled Jack [P.] Greene, who said that Baltimore was actually a nice town and Hopkins was a good university. So he invited me back in 1973 to visit, and I visited for a semester and joined the faculty in 1973.

Warren:  Who was this who invited you?

Knight:  Jack Greene, who was then chair of the history department, Jack P. Greene in American history. At that time the department had just begun to expand beyond its interest, its sort of three-pronged interest in European history, medieval, and American, with an emphasis on colonial and nineteenth century, into a larger, more complex department. I think it went from about nine to twenty members, with an emphasis on social and economic history, and focusing on a program in
Atlantic studies, on the sort of geographical areas around the Atlantic. But actually since it was comparative and analytical, it really went worldwide. This was a very dynamic and interesting and attractive program which has been adopted now by a number of universities, although unfortunately Hopkins now longer has a program called Atlantic studies.

Warren: Oh, really.

Knight: Yes.

Warren: Oh.

Knight: It was one of those strange developments where you develop something which catches on in the rest of the world and then it loses its importance at home.

Warren: What do you think happened?

Knight: A prophet is never without honor save in his own country. No, it’s a little more complex than that. I think partly it was change. You go through a number of directors, and directors change their emphasis. This was a program that was divided between the Departments of History and Anthropology as the primary sponsors, and when anthropology took it over, they decided to change it into global studies, which was then more fashionable than Atlantic area studies. It came to sort of—well, it still continues as global studies, but it doesn’t have the intellectual vitality and dynamism that characterized the Atlantic program, which had a focus. The trouble about global studies is that it tends to be quite unfocused. It’s a hodge-podge, a smorgasbord of disciplines and interests and approaches and concepts. And as such, I think in appealing to everyone, it appeals to no one. And that’s a weakness.

Knight: That's correct.

Warren: Tell me what the campus was like then.

Knight: It was a smaller campus, an intimate community. I liked it, actually, because it was very intellectual. People were very serious about the work they did. I can't say the same today. But it was extremely collegial, at least compared with the experiences I had had in other universities, public universities. The intellectual pursuit was up front, mainstream, and focused.

It also had another quality which was quite appealing; that is, that people lowered disciplinary and departmental boundaries, and what was interesting was the theme and the approach, the concept. So you could have a seminar, which is what the graduate institution is based mainly on, which dealt, for example, with Latin America, which happens to be my field, but the audience would be people from the medical school, because they had an interest in demography or public health, or they could be from the Department of Economics, because it happened to have an economic resonance, or they could be from political science, because there were some political ideas that appealed to them.

And people never identified themselves by department. In fact, sometimes it was difficult to know what department they came from, because they seemed to have more competence than I did in my own subject.

It was non-competitive. I remember having very strong differences of opinion during the seminar, and afterwards we would go to the faculty club or go have dinner and continue the discussions in a very tranquil way. [ Interruption. Tape recorder turned off. ]
Warren: So you went to the faculty club and continued the discussions.

Knight: Yes, we continued. You’d have a difference of opinion, and it remained a professional difference of opinion that never affected personal relations at all. That was actually quite different from other experiences I had had with the personal and the professional and to be indistinguishable, which, unfortunately, I think is manifest more today than it was before. It’s a changed university now. It’s a little larger, there’s certainly a lot more undergraduates. But I don’t think the sense of focus, of self-recognition—I think Hopkins knew what it was about in the ’70s and the ’80s. I think it is less certain that there exists a consensus what Hopkins is about today, and that’s a big difference over twenty-five years.

Warren: And where does a focus like that come from?

Knight: Well, it was easy. It started out as a research university, and the focus was largely on what constituted nineteenth century–then–modern university, and it remained a little anachronistic when other universities branched out. So that was one thing. I think it was precisely because it was intellectual reactionary that it had this focus, but it had to catch up with the times, and I think it did catch up with the times at a lesser cost, social cost, than other universities in the ’60s, partly because of its size and also partly because of its technique.

It operates in a different way structurally than most universities. It’s a sort of constellation of fiefdoms or kingdoms, and they work more or less harmoniously together with the sort of direction from the top, or the trustees and the president, and the individual relations at the top control what the constellation of these semi-autonomous groups will do below. And that could work, I think, when the place was small. People had been here for a long time and knew each
other well. It was less difficult to maintain when there was a lot of turnover from natural causes and otherwise at the top, and also with the expansion of the university.

So you got more administrative professionalism brought into it, but the price of this administrative professionalism was a lack of that strong sense of community as everyone sort of [unclear] to administrative details and techniques off of business or off a large corporation. But it still remains, at heart, a university. I think if we could build our library to that of a top-flight research university, there’s no doubt that it would be ranked higher. It still ranks highly, but it would rank even higher. But I think that it needs a better library if it is to break above that number fifteen. It’s been number fifteen in American universities since about 1915. [Laughter]

Warren: And what’s the issue with the library?

Knight: I think it’s a question of money. I think previously—now it’s getting the attention onto the present administration, but previously there was lip service paid to it, but there was no real, as far as I can tell, serious attempt to go off and raise large amounts of money required to build a major library. Now what has happened is that technology has allowed us to coordinate the libraries and to have the system actually better than what it is in the physical structure simply because of your electronic linkages.

It’s a useful library for graduate purposes and certainly avant garde, but I think that in terms of its documentation, in terms of its basic resource base, in my field in Latin America, if you take any rough twenty themes in Latin America that would be the focus of research either by individual disciplines or by collection of disciplines, I don’t think that the Eisenhower Library and Sheridan Libraries would rank in it, with the possible exception of medicine, because the Welsh
Library is outstanding. But all the other fields, I don’t think it would rank at all on a list of top ten, top twenty research resource allocations.

These are very difficult things to build up. They’re expensive, and sometimes it’s just not a question of money at all, it’s a question of luck. It’s a question of somebody donating or selling to the library a collection which forms a basis of further expansion and growth. In fact, in all the major deposits, they were developed just like that. Probably Princeton is less so. Princeton just has the resources for consistent investment in the area. But apart from Princeton, most of the others are serendipitous expansion. Somebody’s collection comes at a time when they can make the purchase, and that becomes a basis of strength in that area.

Warren: You’ve mentioned so many things. I could go so many directions. Let’s go back to those gatherings in the Hopkins Club, I presume you’re talking about.

Knight: Yes. It was a club then.

Warren: Tell me about that, because I’ve heard just a little bit that the faculty really used it, and I’m interested in that place as a focal point.

Knight: Well, when I came here, the Hopkins Club was still the only place that you could really decently gather in the neighborhood. I mean, now there are options, but there wasn’t much of an option, and maybe that was a good thing, because the club was a faculty club. It was predominantly for faculty. I think it’s now open to anybody who may, more or less. You have to demonstrate some relationship to the university, which can be quite tenuous.

But then it was a faculty club. A substantial proportion of the faculty had lunch there, and a substantial proportion of the faculty used it as the social center after seminars. That is where you
would gather. That is where you would probably take your guests to dinner or drinks. Discussions would continue serially. That is, you could have a discussion going on from Monday to Thursday as the people came back for lunch and continued, or continued to ventilate the idea that they were discussing. I think that’s what was attractive about the place, because people really spent a large proportion of their social time pursuing intellectual ideas, and you could really talk to someone, like Jack Greene on the field, or John Pocock or Phil [Philip] Curtin, and they were incredibly generous with their ideas and their time.

Warren: Would students go along and participate in these discussions?

Knight: Oh, sure. Graduate students would. Undergraduates less so. But graduate students, because usually what would happen is a—I wouldn’t say exactly spontaneous departure from the seminar, to recongregate over an appropriate beverage there. So the more senior graduate students were invited to dinner or to the activity. And that still remains true in the history department, although I think now there is more attempt, again because it might be a function of size, to have these artificially created groups where you must have a percentage of graduate students and you go off campus somewhere.

In fact, I do think it was precisely because of the catering to the graduate students that people started leaving the faculty club to go to graduate-student-recommended areas off campus, some of which were less than desirable, certainly to me. I did not relish going into Hampden, no matter how attractive the locale, and still don’t. So if they were going to discuss something in Hampden, I would drop out. Charles Village was never attractive to me, even before its gentrification, and I haven’t experimented with it now since it’s been somewhat gentrified. But I
have gone down Charles Street, Mount Vernon, some other places, and over in Greenmount to a Thai restaurant, and before that—what’s that Chinese restaurant that folded? Used to be a big lunchtime gathering place.

But now I think there are less of these types of activities. Well, let me back up and say there are less of those that are appealing to me that I participate in. [Laughter]

Warren: Okay. That’s a distinction to make.

Knight: Yes. Yes.

Warren: Let’s talk about how much interaction do you have with undergraduates versus graduates and how that works. How much of an interrelationship there is there?

Knight: It’s an interesting question. Actually, in practice, certainly in my individual case, I spend more time on undergraduates than I do graduates, simply because there are fewer graduates in the field of Latin American history. In fact, I would doubt that we average one graduate working with me per year. I do give a seminar, but the seminar would have other students, not students working under me in my particular area. So I advise undergraduates, and I have anywhere from three to six, from freshmen through senior.

I teach one undergraduate course consistently I’m teaching, and that would have anywhere from eight to twenty, occasionally a little above that, on various aspects of Latin America. As you can see from my CV that I have given you, I have a series of courses I rotate through. I try to give the same course no more often than every third year, so that every cohort will have an opportunity to get it. But there is sufficient variety, that if people get a taste of Latin America, that’s a little broader.
I’m innovating a new course with Sara Castro-Klaren, of literature, which is going to be, if it succeeds, a general introduction to Latin America. It will be the first such course offered here, and we’ll joint-teach it for a year. If it has viability, then we might continue it.

**Warren:** Who is this you’re working with?

**Knight:** Sara Castro-Klaren from Romance languages.

**Warren:** Tell me how that works.

**Knight:** Well, we’ve done this—I’ve done this before, certainly. It works sometimes very well. In this case I have taught a seminar with her before, for undergraduates, which worked very, very well, because it requires a certain intellectual compatibility as well as a certain common approach towards work, you know. I have had with colleagues that I never, never, never would in my life, were I to live as long as Methuselah, repeat the experience, because they’re not disciplined.

If I can’t be intellectually excited about what I’m doing, I don’t think it’s effective for the students either, and so I try to have my undergraduate courses fresh enough that I am pursing my experience in it along with them, and hope that they get some contagious reaction there. I think it works better that way, rather than my expounding and they’re regurgitating. We’re both exploring these dimensions together.

Sara Castro-Klaren sort of works the same. First of all, she’s a little more interdisciplinary than most. She’s very well read in history, and so she does the reading in history and I do the reading in literature, and we sort of bring up general ideas which we involve the students in discussing. In this new course, just as a seminar, we hope to bring in also some invited participants from outside the university in different fields—painters, musicians, people in
literature—to talk about their work. We found that to be really exciting.

The last time we did it, we brought in a Brazilian writer, N______, who is fantastic. She sort of disappointed some of us by saying that she wasn’t sure why she wrote some of her novels the way she did. [Laughter] Actually, one characteristic of the three novels we read was sort of untidy endings. They end anticlimactically in a sort of unfinished way. So everyone was excited—why, why this common trend? And she said, “I just had to finish. Maybe it’s my personality, but, no, there wasn’t any plan, any big idea why it ends like that. It just ends like that.” But other than that, she was very exciting as a writer, as a creative writer, and I think the students caught some of that excitement.

She is from Peru and I am from Jamaica, so we have a sort of non-mainstream American approach to the hemisphere, and I think that is good. We both know the area and have traveled through it extensively. We know people in it, and that’s also good. I think these are requirements, if you’re going to teach the field, that you must have as a minimum.

Warren: What kind of students are attracted to a course like that?

Knight: That’s harder to say. I think that in my case, the students that I have tend a lot to be repeat students. I don’t know whether this is for better or for worse, but they tend to be students—and some of them have been pre-med, so they are across the board—have been students who are not scared about failing at something. They are not in it just for the high grade, because my reputation is that I’m not terribly generous with the grades. I have said that grades are important, but not that important; the ideas are better. The learning process is best. So it’s what you learn from it.
I never grade on a curve. Everyone can get an A. Everyone can flunk. It’s what you do and the degree to which you measure up to what you say you’re going to do. And I’m very clear about what my expectations are, and I have elaborate outlines and I tell them exactly how the course is graded, what they get for a book report, what they get for participation. This is usually standard ten percent. You don’t even have to come to class and you can do well.

And you have options, which I have, as I get older, foreclosed. First it was you had the choice between a term paper or a classroom exam or a take-home exam. Now you have the choice between a term paper and a classroom exam. Or if the class decides it’s a take-home versus classroom. That’s the three options I have given in the last two years.

And the students tend to be students who, either via the classes or by [unclear], have some interest. They want to do international law and they feel that maybe they should go to Latin America. And there are other complementary activities. Some of them have been on study trips abroad either to Europe or to Latin America, to Cuba. I took a group to Brazil two years ago on an intersession, and some of the students after that decided they were interested enough in Latin America to continue to pursue it. Sometimes that’s a culmination of their interests. In fact, the Brazil trip came about because some students studying Portuguese wanted to go to Brazil and persuaded me, against my better judgment, to go with them. And I did that, saying I won’t do it again, and I won’t.

So it varies. I’m not quite sure, because I’ve never looked at the students’ evaluation, whether there is a question and how do they answer it about why they took the class and what they expect to get out of it or what they got out of it [unclear], but they run the gamut. I tend to
encourage students at six weeks into the class, if they’re not doing well, to drop it, telling them there’s much better use for their time and mine. Most times I’ve persuaded them that it’s in our mutual interest for them to say goodbye, because it’s not going to be happy at the end of the semester. I have a policy that anyone who withdraws from a class of mine gets a withdrawn passing, regardless of performance, because I think that to be an intellectually smart decision.

[Laughter]

Warren: [Laughter] That’s very kind.

Knight: Good common sense.

Warren: One of the things that I’m doing, as well as doing interviews, is I’m looking at lots and lots and lots of photographs of this place. One thing I see especially in the period since you’ve been here is a lot of change in the faces of people here. There’s a much wider mix of people, of students.

Knight: Sure. Absolutely.

Warren: Can you talk about that, about how the people in your classroom have evolved, really, through the years?

Knight: Well, I came, I think, the year that Hopkins went coed, so the first year I had one girl in a class of twelve, who actually became a good friend. Unfortunately, she died a few years ago. She was incredibly smart, went to law school afterwards, and she was the only girl. She was really very interesting, because she became a friend and would come back here to visit us and would tell us about some of the changes, because when you are in the change, it’s not obvious sometimes.
It's like watching your own kids. You still have a mental picture of them, even when they're adults, that they were somewhere frozen about eight or nine or something like that.

But two changes here. One is the physical change of the campus. There are a lot more buildings. There's much less green space. I can't say that a lot of the new buildings are aesthetically pleasing, but that's another question and that's a personal opinion.

The big change in the students has been in three ways. The first change is that the proportion of women increases is almost equal to men, so classes which had very few women have now a lot more women. In fact, even in arts and sciences sometimes it's predominantly female. This is certainly true of the last class, undergraduate class last semester.

The second change, when I came here, about sixty percent of undergraduates were pre-med, so the non-science classes were very, very small. Now the pre-meds are less than forty percent, and so the arts and social sciences and humanities sections are much larger, and that provides more clients in something like Latin America than ever before, or in history, in general, than ever before. So there's more variety disciplinary-wise and a greater inclination to do humanities and social sciences than when I came here. You can see it in the majors. You can see it in the variety of types of study.

And the third development is the diversification of the student body. When I came–and I'm sure, although I haven't looked at figures, in the drawing pool where students come from, when I came here, there were overwhelmingly this little enclave running from about Virginia up to Connecticut. Now they're more nationwide and are far more sort of Asians and Indians from India, and I'm sure they're about thirty percent of the student body.
I don’t think the university has really appreciated, accepted, and addressed that type of diversification. It’s still stuck in a very parochial black-white division where minority seems—and you can see it even in the way that Office of Minority Affairs here behaves—they still think that “minority” is black and tend to be black American. In fact, “minority” is not necessarily American, it’s not necessarily black, and it’s not necessarily either economically or intellectually deprived. In fact, if you look at your statistics, you see that it’s anything but. So that there is a lot of catching up to do.

Some years ago, I participated in the summer pre-orientation for minorities, which I stopped participating in. I was struck by how unsophisticated the approach was. And this came to me from the students who were complaining, the participants who were complaining about it, that they were being compartmentalized in ways which were [unclear] and not very comfortable. I don’t know if there are changes there, but there should be.

I think also in the marketing of the university—I use it not in any pejorative sense, but where do you send your students, that if the student undergraduate body is changed that way, then let’s say things like the pre-med students in their placement is going to be immensely more difficult, especially for Asian kids, because they are a higher proportion now of the applicant pool than they ever were before. And while there might not be any legal quotas, yet every cohort wants to be diverse. An Asian American student applying to California medical school is definitely not going to be in the top drawer for that, because that’s going to be the overwhelming proportion of their applicants.

So just in the strategic application, we are—and I tell students that when they come in. I
interview and write for pre-med students and I would ask them where they’re applying and if they are Asian American, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and maybe from California, I would say you have to mark off your home state advantage against the disadvantage that you’re the majority of that cohort, that pool. And certainly when you look at the proportion again, you can tell it doesn’t matter if a kid has a combined score over 66, because they’re obviously going to name their school, but if they’re down in everybody’s fishing pool at 55 to 66, then it becomes very clear that you’re going to have to be much more strategic, much broader in your applicant base, and ultimately be prepared for less success there, because there are just so many people swimming at that level. These are things in the type of advising that I think are important to students. So those are the basic changes.

The faculty has also changed a lot, I think, over the years, catering to new constituencies and new realities. Engineering, when I came here, was not a major part of the undergraduate curriculum. In fact, I think it was revived only when I came here. It’s now quite an important part. Peabody has been brought in, and that’s also an important part. We’ve had other ventures, too.

Warren: You were still fairly new here when Peabody was brought in. What was the reaction among the faculty to that development?

Knight: Well, most of the discussion went on before I came, so when I came it was sort of accepted, the Peabody. But Peabody was accepted much better than the—what is the marine biology—Chesapeake Bay Institute, for example. That was not accepted very well. And although it had some financial problems at the time, I think the Hopkins community accepted the Peabody much better than the expansion to China, although, again, we weren’t given much say in that. But,
no, the Peabody was accepted.

The Peabody was considered to be a Baltimore jewel that had to be protected, and if Hopkins at that time hadn't moved in, there was a strong feeling that it would either fold or move out of state. And so I think that most faculty members, certainly the people I was talking to at the time, felt that Peabody would and could be integrated very well into the Hopkins system.

Warren: Do you get Peabody students in your classes?

Knight: Yes. Well, I get students who do a joint degree with Peabody. I wouldn’t say they are Peabody. They are mainly Homewood students doing Peabody, rather than Peabody students doing Homewood. But, yes, at both levels, both graduates and undergraduates. Most of the students are studying voice there. There was a girl who did flute, now works at a musical enterprise in New Mexico or something. That’s common.

Warren: And you’ve mentioned a couple of times that you have a lot of people coming from the medical school and School of Public Health. They come here to take classes or do you go down there?

Knight: These are seminars. Seminars at Hopkins are open to anyone, so they’re advertised. There’s a calendar. Depending on the topic and the paper—and the papers are pre-circulated. You can request to have a paper sent to you, and if you like the topic, it’s something of interest, then they come. There are a few students who have managed, with great difficulty, to have seminars done in the medical school and on the Homewood campus, but their calendars are so different and their operations so distinct that that is much more difficult to operate, and it’s not very common.

Undergraduates tend to have research projects over in the medical school, pre-meds and
so on, and so that’s built in. You’re going over there for three to six hours, so that’s a little
different than going over there for a fifty-five-minute class, jumping on the shuttle, and coming
back over to Homewood. In fact, it’s even hard to coordinate between Peabody and the
Homewood campus. As students will tell you, it becomes very tricky sometimes.

The price is the social life, really, when you are in two different semi-systems as these are,
there’s less time for the type of socializing with your peers than if you’re just in one or the other.
But that is still open. I attend functions with the Institute of Policy Studies. I’m invited to things
at the medical school. It’s a little harder to go to, but, still, especially in public health, if they have
people from Latin America who they feel might be of some interest to me, if they ask could they
speak to somebody who knows something about Ecuador or Cuba or Argentina, then I get pulled
into the system.

Warren: I haven’t really spent much time in East Baltimore yet, but I’m fascinated by this
blending. It just seems like it’s a wonderful opportunity in both directions, having people–

Knight: I don’t think it’s a blend. I think it’s more like a pizza topping. That is, there is a basic
foundation, but to say “blend,” I think, would be exaggerated. It is an autonomous institution over
there, and whereas sometimes for faculty purposes we come together, to all intents and purposes
they run their own show independently, without any input from us. And it’s really very difficult,
because they’re much more intense, plus their calendar, their academic calendar, is different from
ours. They run a year-round system of modules, where they have about four terms, of which
they’re doing three terms. And we tend to run two semesters, not terms. That makes it a little
difficult to synchronize our operations.
Their research, although there might be some areas in physics and some of the other natural sciences, biology, biochemistry, that there's some compatibility, bioengineering, so there are areas in which their research tends to be closer or of mutual interest, but the pedagogical aspect of it is much more separate, because we tend to be under different administrations. We are under the dean of arts and sciences. Bioengineers would be under engineering or arts and sciences. Then demography is entirely over in public health. So that there's some areas. There isn't, I think, any logic. It's just a coincidence where they developed. So, not having resources, it would not be smart to duplicate things, it just stayed and grew there.

But I can call over and get help if I want it—I have in the past—from people in demography, in a field that I am certainly not an expert in at all, and I'm just amazed that they stop what they're doing and give me all the help I need. Whenever I do it, I'm always taken aback. But it's one of the hallmarks. People tend to be very generous with their time, and it's done without—I did it when I was an untenured associate professor, so it's not a question of its rank or prestige or anything like that. I think it's a sense of community, of course, is what people are about. They're about ideas. They're about intellectual pursuit.

Warren: Just for my own clarification, you say that here at Homewood there are two semesters, but a few minutes ago you made a reference to the intersession.

Knight: Yes.

Warren: What's the intersession?

Knight: Intersession is a period in December, January. Semester runs from September to December. Then next semester starts end of January until May. There was an intersession which
for years was devoted to other types of pursuits—it's called intersession, and when I came here, intersession courses were non-credit courses, where students would come together and say, "We would like to look at the Mexican revolution in three weeks. Would you care to direct us?" And I would direct them. They got no credits for it, but they got a lot about this particular theme, Mexican revolution.

But graduate students would do the same thing. Somebody would say, "Look. I want to do, on French painting, the eighteenth century, but I don't want to take it for a full semester. I just want to get an idea of what French painting in the eighteenth century is all about." And some person in the history of art would offer this.

Then after a time, that started being an option. You could take it for zero credits or one credit. And there was the inflation, two credits. And I notice now that there are lots of courses being given for three credits in the intersession. I have spoken to the dean about this, that I think that whether this is grade inflation or reflects substantial qualitative difference, it bothers me that someone can get in three weeks the same amount of credits as three months, regardless of what you're doing.

I just don't think that this is good—plus, there were cases where I knew these people were going off traveling. My Brazilian intersession trip was a clear case in point. Was that a one-credit trip? Possibly. Was that a three-credit trip? No way, even though they wrote and they spent a whole semester before doing seminars and watching videos about Brazil and things like that. But I don't think that's the same rigor of someone doing modern Brazil with me over three months. I think that's under reconsideration. There was an attempt to abolish the credits, and there was a
howl from the undergraduates, who obviously have a much more mercantile attitude towards this operation.

But I would rather just not give the courses. I think we should go back to saying if someone wants to develop an idea and they want to find some volunteer to do it, let them do it.

Warren: I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: What do you want your students to get most from their Hopkins experience and their time with you?

Knight: Well, I usually say to my students, year in and year out, that I want them to be less complacent about everything than when they came in. That is, I want them to raise questions. I don’t presume that my students want to do history, but I presume that they want to be responsible citizens, and therefore what I want to do is to equip them to be better citizens wherever they are, and “better citizens” means that they must be better informed. So I think the informational base is key.

The second, though, is what you do with the information when you get it, and so I have always said that what’s useful about what I’m doing in history is not the factual information I provide, but how you can use that factual information, how you can shape it to resolve a practical problem that you might have in any sphere of endeavor.

So I’m just giving you a tool. If you get a mass of information, how do you decide what is reliable? How do you when, if you’re sitting as head of a corporation of in the government, and a very respected, well-documented advisor comes to you and gives you an eloquent and seemingly
persuasive argument about a course of action, how do you pick it apart? That is the key thing, because if you can’t do that, every idea, every idea well presented is going to have equal merit, and you have really got to learn to separate between good ideas, what it is.

And what essentially makes, or should make, the decision is a cost-benefit analysis. If you have what is the short- and long-term costs of taking that course of action versus the short- and long-term benefits, that’s what you have to ask your advisors about if they haven’t done that. You have to throw out the idea, because it’s not going to fly. It’s a gamble. You may as well go to Las Vegas. [Warren laughs.]

The other thing I want them to do is to be a little more sensitive about variety. In fact, in Latin America, invariably I say no matter what aspect of Latin American history you take, two things are going to, or should, appear to you at the end of the semester or you haven’t learned anything. One is that this is a very diverse region. Every country is diverse, but the whole region is more diverse. And that it’s changing, that time, place, and circumstances are extremely important considerations. Mexico in 1960 is not the same Mexico of today. Argentina in 1910 is not the same as Argentina today. And you have to be sensitive to these changes.

Invariably when I ask my students, I would say to them, I would throw the question, “What do you think of Argentina?” and I would say, “If I ask you that, you have to run through your mind certain questions. What many people, what sort of population, what is the per-capita income, and what time of day are they having right now?” [Laughter] And so you must have the sense of geography, where it is, and it’s very important.

I am amazed how many students will not realize that they’re in the Southern Hemisphere
and therefore their seasons are the opposite to ours. I told them, even if you intellectually appreciate it, when you go there, it’s something different. When you fly to Buenos Aires in August, man, it’s freezing cold.” I just came back from Australia and had the same, and I knew I was going into winter. It still sort of hits you. You live in Baltimore, you know, everything is brown and dry and very, very hot or humid, and you go down and it’s pleasant, it’s a nice winter day.

These are things that they must—and if you can do that in a geographical sense, you can do that in a human sense, that people are different and therefore you should make your opinions very carefully about people, and then generalize even more carefully about groups. I would always say to them something like, “Hopkins is a highly selective institution, but I’m sure there are some of you here and some of you know them, who are here only by the grace of God.” [Laughter] They demonstrate daily that God moves in his mysterious ways his wonders us to perform. [Laughter]

Warren: Have there been any students who really stand out in your mind, people that you’ve worked with, who have left a lasting impression with you?

Knight: Sure. I have been fortunate and I think I’ve learned from a lot of students over the years, and some of them have even become friends in all sorts of ways. Students whom I thought were very bright; they’ve been students whom I’ve flunked, and later said my flunking them was a big thing in their life, and they changed their ways because of that, because someone dared to flunk them.

Again, which goes to show that sometimes we think students at Hopkins are just in it for the grade, but, you know, you never can tell what moves a student and when, because sometimes
they just get—somewhere between eighteen and twenty-two, they wake up, they’re not going to be here forever, and that the purpose of the enterprise is something much more vast than the transition in high school to a job or vocation. And when they come in and they talk about—students are very sensitive, very curious. Hopkins doesn’t have better students, I think, than anywhere else, but it has a shorter span. That is, you get students who are very bright and then you get that group of what I’ll call mediocre. What you don’t get at Hopkins, because of the size, is the long tail that you get in other institutions. At least when I teach elsewhere, that’s what I find is a big difference.

I don’t think those student are any less bright or Hopkins students are the brightest, at least not in my Hopkins groups, I don’t find people who absolutely can’t write, can’t think, don’t want to do it, which is a fatal combination for an instructor. At Hopkins, there might be one of those deficiencies, but not all three in combination, so there’s a possibility to work with a student. You find a lot of students are indecisive or confused, but I was at that age and that’s normal, and you can reason to them why it is you have to make decisions, why it is you have to do things at certain times in your life. In your second year it’s better to decide what you want to major in than in your senior year, because it allows you to prepare. It’s junior year you should begin thinking seriously about how you’d like to spend the rest of your life, because you just have a limited allocation left of your time in the university.

But I’ve had students who have gone through and have done a variety of things—medical school, law school. Some have even become professors of history. And others have gone into business, and they still keep in touch. I visit them when I’m on the road if I’m in their area, and
we still talk about it.

I used to have—no longer do—that’s one of the changes, but it’s a change in me. I just don’t have the energy and the enthusiasm of youth. But when Hopkins was smaller, one of the things I did, and I did it through the late ’80s, was that I always invited every class home at the end of the semester, the undergraduate classes, and they had two rules. One is they could bring any friend, if they had one, and, two, is they could never discuss the class or anything relating to the class—no grades, no problems. They could discuss anything else. This unofficial thing at home.

The funny thing is that a lot of them would bring friends from other schools who were visiting, or schools in the area or something like that. Usually it’s a boyfriend, girlfriend, or they play the same sports or something, which gave it some diversity. That was when you really got to know the students, and I always told them that I didn’t do it consciously and there was no ulterior motive, but I would only write a letter for a student if I could say more than an outsider could look from the transcripts and determine, so I would never just write a letter just because a student got an A in the class or even was a member of the class. I needed to know whether you had a sense of humor, whether you were tolerant, whether you had any ideas outside. And this is the time when I would ask them what about their reading, did they subscribe to newspapers. Sometimes I’d ask in class. But what did they want to do afterwards?

Often you forgot the idea or you filed it away in a way that one does, but sometimes student were doing unusual things, going to unusual places, and that stuck. I remember once I was sitting in my office when a guy, bearded, came in. His voice was gruff, and he said, “You don’t remember me, but I was in your class.”
And I thought a while and I said, “Well, I don’t remember your name, but I do remember you. The last time we spoke, you were off to Spain with your sister in a Fiat 124, right?”

He says, “How do you remember that?”

I said, “Because you told me.” [Laughter] I remember telling him, so I remember that they were just opening a Safari Park outside Madrid and that he should go to it because it was in a very interesting area of the province of Madrid called [unclear]. Of course he went, and he had come back with a bottle of the finest Spanish cognac, which I accepted. I don’t usually accept presents from students, but graduates, yes. And if it’s the finest, definitely. [Warren laughs.] So I accepted it, and we became friends. Turns out he was a successful businessman in Madrid at the time, had gone back. Later I went and played tennis with him in Madrid. I played tennis in those days. He’s now relocated to Florida. He’s a very successful entrepreneur in Latin America. Occasionally when I give these alumni things, I see him.

But he was a guy I actually first flunked, and then he came back and took the course with me, and he confessed later that he was determined to find out whether he really was no good or whether he could pass a course with me. He was a smart kid. He was just playing soccer all the time. He said, you know, he would just dash off these overnight things and he’d get an A or a B+ that satisfied him. He’d dash it off for me and I dared to flunk him.

Then when he came in to discuss it, because he said, you know, you could negotiate a grade at Hopkins, which you can, I guess, I said to him, “This is such a dismal thing, it’s beyond the pale of salvation.” [Laughter] That’s how he reported it. I don’t remember being that rude to students usually. I’m colorful, but I don’t think I would quite say it that way. I’m usually a little
more hesitant. I said, "Well, you know, I'm not quite sure that if you had ten years you could actually improve this grade."

But on the other hand, I also try to be fair to students. I have told students—I do a lot of comments about how I arrive at the evaluation that translates to a grade, and most of the times there are enough comments there that when I look at it again or anyone looking at it can be guided. And every since I have started teaching, I have had a policy that any grade that I give to a student that the student finds unsatisfactory, that student can take that paper and that grade to anyone in the university, including the janitor, and if the janitor gives a higher grade, I'll accept it. You can also redo the exam for me, but when you redo it, I start over from scratch and you can get a lower grade than you got, as well as a higher grade.

A few students, they've never taken it to a janitor. They've taken it to other professors, but I haven't yet changed a grade. That's simply because there is sufficient explanation for the basis on which you make this evaluation, and unless you are downright incompetent or you have missed it, and occasionally you have missed something in a student's work, somebody, a reasonable person is going to say, "That's the grade."

I have done this, too. My daughter went to another university, would bring her stuff, and she would come in with righteous indignation. "This poor professor (or graduate student) gave me this grade, and I deserve better." And I would read it. There hasn't been a single case. There was one case in which I thought she could get a marginally better grade. I said, "I think this is fair." And even in this case, I said to her, "This is not worth fighting over, because it's as close to what I would give you as an outsider in the field. Grades are not that important, you know. They
are subjective. They have a range, and you just don’t happen to be persuasive enough to fall at the high end of that range.”

But what I was impressed about, though, at that university, was that every paper—and she brought lots of Bs—were the comments that the instructors, whether they were graduate students or senior professors, spent a lot of time trying to fathom what it is she was trying to say and to pay respect to it and do justice to it. And I think that’s good teaching.

**Warren:** That’s what you’re there for.

**Knight:** Yes, and that’s what I try to do.

**Warren:** You made reference to doing alumni events.

**Knight:** Yes.

**Warren:** Tell me about that.

**Knight:** Well, occasionally the alumni office would ask—well, I think it’s a standing thing. If faculty travel, as they do, a lot of Hopkins faculty do travel, because it’s not surprising, if you’re one of the leading universities, that you’re involved in all sorts of international and national organizations. At the moment I am president of the Latin American Studies Association, which is the largest area studies association—second largest, after the Chinese, in the world. So I find myself going to activities certainly all over the United States and all over Latin America. The alumni office would say, “If you’re going there and we have a function or we have a group, can we tack on a day and you go speak to them?” And I may do that.

They also have lecture tours which they set up to service these alumni groups and faculty
are invited to go along and be the featured speaker at these. So I’ve gone to California and I’ve
gone all over Florida for them, and I’ve gone to Washington and I’ve spoken here in Baltimore
for these. These are opportunities for people to come back who have graduated and left the
institution, to talk to someone who’s still there, and feel a little bit of connectivity to the place.

In Latin America, I must confess that most of the ones that I consult, because we don’t
have branches there as we do across the United States, are people that somewhere along the road,
they were in my seminar and I knew them, so I would call them up and still do that. And they’re
very fond of Hopkins. Sometimes they surprise me by their enthusiasm. It looks much better when
you’ve left. Maybe I should have left long ago. It would look better. [Laughter]

Warren: What kind of things do you hear? What do you mean? What do they say?

Knight: Well, a lot of them, after being away from the place, find that the experience compares
favorably to what they’re doing, whatever it is they’re doing. Second, and this is mainly among
the graduate students, they find that the method and the form and the quality of instruction was
much better comparatively than they thought, because you can’t judge it while you’re in it.
However, when you meet other people—and there are a lot of people told me, “We can go to a
conference, and the way that someone talks, we say they must be a Hopkins person.” [Laughter]
And then they find it’s a Hopkins person. Well, that’s the type of community culture, because I’ve
always said I can do this for Wisconsin people. [Laughter] So I think it’s community culture,
certain ways we phrase things, certain ways we ask questions.

There is a reputation in history that Hopkins graduates tend to be a little less tolerant than
most, of nonspecific things. They’re very serious about what they do and will not suffer fools
lightly. I don’t know if that’s more so than most, but I’m not at all surprised by that observation, because our seminars are serious things, and our graduate students in history, unlike most others—in fact, I don’t know any other university—have only seminar. There is no course work. There is no busy work. You can assume to be fully professional from your first year right through. You read papers, you pull them apart, you build ideas, you write seminar papers. That’s what it’s about.

It’s intellectual pursuit from day one. It’s not the filler things, you know, you have to do so many credits of this—as I did at Wisconsin—taking these courses only because this is statistics. If you don’t have thirty-one credits or forty credits, you can’t move to the next stage, and it doesn’t matter what the quality is. I sat through some abysmal courses at Wisconsin just to fulfil requirements. I mean, it was clear from the day I went in that the professor knew very little about what he purported to speak about, nor cared about students.

Actually, I never was a teaching assistant and never taught at all until I graduated from the university and began. But I formed my teaching by my reaction as an undergraduate and graduate, but I would never do the things I never liked or appreciated when I was an undergraduate. And I try not to. I think if you get paid to do a job, you should do the job. You don’t like the pay or you don’t like the job, change it. But I never go to class without knowing how my class is doing.

I never have a T.A. without having the T.A. have an outline, what they’re going to do. The T.A.s claim that I don’t give them enough independence, but I told them it’s more important that I know what the students are getting for their money than the independence of the T.A. The T.A. is going to be a professor and have all the independence in the world. But I must know how
the class is run.

And it's also good for them to know that you should never go into class and wing it. You should know how you elicit questions. You should know what are the probable questions, should have a range of possible answers which are acceptable and why, and that's what the business is about. This is how you can instruct people into improving their way of thinking. You go in there and you don't know where the question is coming from, you have nothing and the students usually have nothing. You've going to have an exercise in silence. You don't need a classroom for that.

So that's just my basic approach. And I tell the students right up front, I have usually two pages of what my course is about, what I expect to get out of it, how I'm conducting it. I have reading assignments. I have the probable questions they should be asking of the readings. As I said, you don't read to remember. You don't need to do that. You have a computer. My students can consult books.

I have never had closed-book exams. My students can bring all their notes, all their textbooks in, and they're told, "You get no credit whatsoever for copying stuff or reciting stuff. You're intelligent. You can do that. It's the value added." So I never ask them, "Who was Christopher Columbus?" I would ask a question, "What was the impact of Columbus' adventure into the American hemisphere?" And there they have a whole range, but you have to think about it. And you can be informed by your reading and you can take up the books, but that's where you have to shape it, because no book, no article looks at it quite that way.

And they get these study guides. In the readings, I usually say, "These are the four or five
questions you should have in your mind as you read, and you should read with the idea that you want to construct an answer to these questions.” And that’s where the reading is useful. If not, it’s just to get a few basic facts, which as soon as the semester is over, you throw out, as you ought to. You want those again, you just get your computer. You can find that. And I think that’s the important, at least, difference that I think I bring to some of the methods to which I was exposed when I was a student and what I said I would never do. People like it or they don’t, but at least they know from the first day what it is going to be and in the first week whether it’s something they want to do or not.

And I have a lot of turnover. I have students—it’s less now, but I know in previous years it was about one-fifth of the students who would start, by the second week would drop. So I’d always have to make more course outlines because those were the last, and then people coming in. It’s a little less now because I think the student grapevine is a little more efficient. [Warren laughs.] I notice the students at Hopkins are reluctant to take a course that student friends of theirs or it has not been evaluated by others. And a lot of them still take the course because they admit, sheepishly, that it’s equivalent of what people called “slide course,” that they need to keep their averages up. I always joke that mine is a slide course, but for some reason they’re always sliding to the bottom. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Do you think—this is my Christopher Columbus question—do you think Johns Hopkins has a personality?

**Knight:** Oh, yes. I think every institution does. Earlier when I said that I thought we were losing that focus, when I came here, I think from the president down, there was a conscious attempt to
expose you to the Hopkins system, which is quite different. I was quite impressed that Steve Muller, whom I met when the new faculty were introduced to him, I think in this place, actually at the Evergreen House where he had dinner for the new faculty and their spouses or significant others. I met him probably a year or two after, and I was blown over that from that three- to five-minute conversation, he remembered who I was and what I did. When I run into Steve Muller now on a plane or in an airport, he still knows who I am and what I do.

I’m not sure that his successors, even with their apparatus for things, know who their faculty are and what they do. When I came here, most people exchange lores about the institutional myths, the institutional customs, such as they were, eccentricities and everything. And you shared it and you learned it and you followed by doing, participating. I’m not sure that still continues. First of all, I notice that there are larger number of faculty who don’t do anything that I go to, don’t go there. We never went to faculty assemblies unless it dealt with parking and salaries. So that’s not a good litmus test of the interest of the faculty.

But I’ll give you a very simple thing. When I came here, substantial proportion of the faculty went to commencement. I went to commencement, until last year, if I was in the country, every commencement, and I always sat next to Orest Ranum. We always went over who the graduates were, whether we knew of them, what did this tell us about either the field or the university or the choice of speakers and so on. It was a real type of thing.

When I decided this year that I wouldn’t go, it was because last year I was absolutely appalled at the representation, which I think for a private university does say something. There are moments—and I’m not big on ceremony, but there are moments when the ceremony is really very
important because it is the institution’s window that others can look in on. And that’s one such. I think under the new dean it might come back and I might be persuaded it’s worth my while to go, and I would like to go, because I think it’s important. And I like the new dean.

But we’ve had such a cavalier attitude in the last six or eight years in the deanship, with rotating deans, in a sense of neither here nor there, that certainly I just thought it was not personally fulfilling. Thursday—I think it’s always on Thursday—Thursday [unclear]. I think about the students, and some of them have come, and I think it really is a good— you meet their parents, and that’s a really good bond, but it’s much more than that.

I think that you can see it even in the committees, the attitudes to committees, the sense of Hopkins as opposed to what it is. When I came here, one of the big differences—I can’t remember anyone saying, “It’s done this way at Harvard, and maybe we should think of it,” or Michigan or Berkeley. I never heard that. I mean, they would say, “This is the Hopkins way.” Like it was good enough. And now you have people who really don’t know what the Hopkins way is. They say, “This is what is done where I’m familiar.” And that, I think, dilutes and depreciates the institutional culture.

But institutional cultures act on symbols, and new symbols are promulgated and propagated by the senior officials. You cannot have a culture that is not cultured and fed by the president, the provost, and the deans. These are the people who really set the tone. These are the people who tacitly at times and then surreptitiously say, “This is my view of the institutional culture,” and then the others come more or less close to it. If you don’t have that, you don’t have an institution. And it doesn’t have to be a distinguished institution; it could be a vending machine.
That is the culture of that vending machine and you know it. It’s distinctive.

Part of our crisis, as I see it, as a faculty that’s been around for twenty-six years, is that we’re not quite sure that we are a leading research institution, and we’re not quite sure that we should become an excellent liberal arts college. We’ve doubled, in my time here, the number of undergraduates, but we have never really seriously, so far as I know, said, “How should we organize our niche as an undergraduate teaching institution?”

We talk about we want undergrads to be happier and we provide all sorts of things, but the intellectual components, what Johns Hopkins University stands for at the undergraduate level, as far as I know, has never really been seriously discussed, because I do not consider Century 21 to be a really serious discussion of this, for the simple reason that, (A), it didn’t say anything about the graduate component on which it built its reputation, and, (B), that it deliberately avoided any of the really difficult issues that any university anywhere at the end of the twentieth century confronts.

So I was very unhappy about the Century 21 experience, and I’m glad that we no longer hear about it, but I do feel that we have, from time to time, to make these communal soundings of our collective sense, and it’s from those periodic communal soundings that we establish the compass that guides the institution and establishes what is distinctive about that institution or dissipates it, in which case the institution sort of loses its sense of direction and fades away. I don’t think we are about to fade away, but I think that it’s crucial, it’s vital that we reenergize that sense of purpose and direction, what it is we want to be in the twenty-first century.

**Warren:** You alluded to the myths of Hopkins. What are the myths of Johns Hopkins?
Knight: Well, the myths of Hopkins is that this is a—well, the biggest myth, of course, is that this is just a good medical institution which trains pre-meds and so on. If you go anywhere in the world, when I say I’m from Johns Hopkins, they say, “Oh, you’re a medical doctor?” I have to say, “I’m a doctor, but not a medical doctor.” And sometimes the joke is lost, especially in translation. But we are. We might be the world’s best medical training institution, but we are much more than that.

I like to tell my colleagues at Homewood that there are more departments ranking in the top ten nationwide outside of the natural sciences than in the natural sciences. In fact, I would say that the more distinguished departments are outside the natural sciences, and that we don’t rank as well as we should at the undergraduate level, especially in physics and biology and chemistry, I think for our national ranking as a university.

The second myth, of course, about Hopkins is that it’s hostile to innovation. Most people outside say, “Oh, but that’s a staid Southern institution,” and, I think, Mrs. Woodrow Wilson’s notion of Hopkins at the turn of the nineteenth century, at the end of the nineteenth century, and I don’t think that’s true at all. In fact, Hopkins has been consistently innovative. It’s been fiscally conservative. It never expanded when other universities expanded, and as a result, it didn’t have to contract when others were forced to contract at the time. So it’s maintained its small size, but I think that what it consciously did over the years was to say, “We will do those things we do as well as anybody, as best as we can, but we won’t try to do everything.” And this was a very good strategic choice.

Most people I talk to, even people I respect highly, are always astonished at the small size
of the Hopkins faculty and the institution as a whole. They’re always saying, “Oh, but you must be as big as Harvard or Yale, Princeton, Duke.” I say, “Oh, no, we are a fraction.” Our history department has twenty-one members and ranks about seventh nationwide, somewhere around seventh by all the periodic national tests. And there is no university under twice the size that ranks in the top twenty-five. So when you consider the areas we can’t by physical mass offer, areas of history, it’s just astonishing.

I think there was something to doing well what you do, rather than trying to cover everything and be a journeyman for [unclear], because one of the things that it allowed Hopkins faculty to do, by being good at what they did, they really set the tone. I mean, I remember some years ago you couldn’t pick up the officers of any national association and not find a Hopkins representative on it. One of the things it allowed us to do is see, when you wanted to find out who are the best people in biology, you called your colleague, because he knew the whole country, what everybody is doing in his area. In history it was the same thing. In literature. These people were the leaders in their field, with national, international reputations, and they knew who did what where. That was an asset, I think, in being selective, being selective at that high level of selectivity. We can compete with much bigger people because we tend to concentrate our efforts in specific areas.

The down side of that is, of course, that it’s very good to do that in research, it’s not so good to do that in teaching, because teaching responds to market demands and students want things, and you can fritter a lot of resources in fads which students decide are indispensable to the moment, but they don’t have the maturity to see that it’s a fad. They do a lot of headline-chasing.
I don’t know how many students have come to me and said, “You’ve got to offer a course in the Nicaraguan revolution,” or the Salvadorian revolution.

I say, “I don’t do individual revolutions. I do comparative revolutions.” So I have to put it in some context. But I would tell them, “Central America bores me. I go there, but I’m not terribly interested. You want to do something in that? You work up a paper in that. I’ll guide you in it, but I’m not giving a whole course for eight to twelve students on Central America.”

I can’t justify it to myself. If I am not interested, if I can’t fit it into the larger picture of Latin America, I’m just not going to do it. And the way I teach it is that whatever I do, it illuminates some aspect of the wider geography of Latin America and the Caribbean. I don’t let students push me into it, but I’ll reason with them, and I will direct readings or give intersession courses—reluctantly, but I will—on whatever their passion of the moment is. But I think that’s much more fruitfully handled in something like a symposium or invited speakers who talk about it for a while, rather than pouring resources into a particular course that’s a transient fad, as important as it is.

Warren: Yes, history takes the long view, doesn’t it?

Knight: It does. It does.

Warren: My light is beeping at us. We’re at the end of our tape. We can pop in another one. I’m so happy, I’ve got–

Knight: Is there anything that I have not—that we haven’t gone into? Because you asked a lot of people, so you must have a pattern of what you want to ask.

Warren: One question that I haven’t asked you is, are there particular colleagues who have
made a difference to you.

Knight: Oh, yes.

Warren: May I put in another tape?

Knight: Absolutely. Because that’s what kept me at Hopkins when I was tempted several times to go, and once I did put up my house for sale and would have gone. I stayed not because of Hopkins, but other times it was because of Hopkins colleagues.

Warren: All right. Let’s put another tape in.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Warren: This is Mame Warren. It’s the twenty-first of July, 1999, and I’m still in Baltimore, Maryland, and I’m still with Franklin Knight. We were just starting to talk about colleagues who have made a difference to you.

Knight: Yes. I have had really lots of colleagues that I have really come to admire, who have helped me along the way. In my own department, I must start with Jack Greene, who persevered in my coming here. Jack is the one who used to call me, when he was chairman, at midnight and one o’clock in the morning. It upset my wife quite a bit. He works at night, and he has this extraordinary energy which he thinks everyone shares. He doesn’t take no for an answer easily.

The history department that’s now changing because of the demography is the construction, single-handedly, of Jack Greene. He’s the one who went to Cornell, to Columbia, and brought people away to Hopkins in the late ’60 and ’70s, and elsewhere.

But Jack Greene is always interested, because he thinks universally, although he’s an
American historian. He’s very well read. He knows other areas. He keeps up with the field, so he has been really key, and he does colonial history, U.S. history, which has a lot to do first with the non-mainland English colonies in the Caribbean, which overlaps with me, but also with Latin America.

Another person who has been incredibly helpful both professionally and personally has been Orest Ranum. Orest is just one of these fantastic people who will go over and above the call of friendship for you. He’s worried about whether you’re happy, comfortable, working well, not working well. He’s so practical. He and I, in the early ’70s, went to more wood dumps to get firewood than anybody. We were then young and we had chain saws, and we would rip up an oak tree and split it up and take it home and burn firewood at that time. He is a great cook. He knows wines. And we could talk about all sorts of things.

He’s just intellectually curious, which is what I like about my Hopkins colleagues, their intellectual curiosity. You could really talk to them about areas that they were not experts in, and they would ask you really provocative questions that pushed you on to better work.

Lou Galambos was another amazing one. He’s an economic historian. Although I am a socioeconomic historian, I must say that my economics is a lot more practical than most professional economists, and Lou could appreciate that, but push you to the rigor of the professional economist. What Lou forced me always to do was to make sure that when I made a statement purporting to understand an economic process, it would fly among the professionals.

And that’s what the seminar system does here. You give a paper and you have all these experts, and they come in—John Pocock, Phil Curtin, others—and they will read it, and the types of
questions that they ask you and send you back to the drawing board sometimes, they make it so
good that I have said on many occasions that I have given papers at a lot of national, international
conferences, but I seldom ever publish anything before passing it by my colleagues. And when it
meets their approval, I’m pretty confident that it can face the world. And that’s the type of thing
intellectually that is really very good and is very precious to the community at Hopkins, because
these people are not judging you by any pre-set standard. They really are just openly intellectually
curious, and it is that non-judgmental curiosity, I think, that helps you in your own field, because
it forces you to be more rigorous about what you’re doing and saying, and it’s very good practice
for what’s beyond.

Carl Christ, also in economics. I now talk to Steve Hanke, although Hanke is just a lot
more practical than I care to be. [Laughter] He’s too busy changing government, but his
experience is very useful for me, especially in Latin America. We tend to talk mostly about
Argentina and Jamaica, but now he’s off—he hit the news for the latest. He’s doing Kosovo
economic reconstruction. But Steve is a good man to have on your side.

They’re these colleagues that I can go and relax and have a drink or have lunch with and
talk about what it is that preoccupies me intellectually. I have two hours with Pocock and I come
back feeling as if I’m back in sophomore year, whatever I was doing, and I have so much to catch
up. But it doesn’t faze me; I just work a little harder. [Laughter] So that’s pretty good.

In the past, it was these considerations, the type of nonmaterial incentives that made
Hopkins really difficult to leave, not just for me, but for others. So you’d find that Hopkins was
hard to raid at a certain level simply because people were not just interested in more money,
which is easy to produce, but in the work environment. And the work environment had these intangibles that are very hard to reproduce, recreate elsewhere, much more individualistic and much more competitive, and also much more ostentatious. I like Hopkins because there might be a collective conceit, but there was no individual conceit about the work. People just took it on its merit and tended not to care who you were.

It was the work that mattered. If it was distinguished, it was distinguished. If it was not distinguished, you knew about that. [Laughter] But you could do nondistinguished work at one moment and distinguished work at another, and it's okay. You could give a paper, as I have, and say, "This is a preliminary paper. I'm just starting these ideas." Custer felt better, I'm sure, at the end of his experience than you would after an hour and a half. But if you didn't take it too personally, or should I say that if you were a little luckier than Custer and you survived with ego intact, you could do it again and you'd come back.

I have had running debates with Jack and John Pocock for over ten years, and it's good to see that Jack was vehemently opposed at the beginning. Ten years later, he's repeating the ideas as if they're common property, which they are now. But again I think it was good that at least John at that time told me that these ideas had possibilities that could be developed, they were reasonable, I just had to go find empirical evidence to support it. So Jack's hostility to them, once I'd found the evidence, he changed his mind, which again was good, because at least it challenged me and meant that the intuition had to be more than intuition. I don't think it's just intuition. I think I'd done a lot of work on it at the time. I just hadn't done as much work as required to persuade people who had contrary views developed with different evidence for a long, long time.
But I had the same experience with Curtin, too. I remember once Curtin challenged me to go find the data for whatever I was saying, or he wouldn’t accept it. I produced the data. He changed his mind. Then I knew I had the data. Luckily I found it. Sometimes I can’t. But in this particular instance I had been working in the archives in Spain and had come up with this sort of stuff. I didn’t realize that it was so novel. I just found the data because I was working on something. Then when I saw what he had written, I said, “I don’t believe that at all, because I have data which disproves that.” He says, “Well, if you can produce the data, I’ll change my mind, but from what I have, that’s my conclusion.” So I produced the data, and he changed it.

Warren: It sounds like a wonderfully stimulating atmosphere.

Knight: Yes. It is. It is. And it really keeps you on your toes, and it’s an extremely valuable way for testing ideas. The seminar series, it really works, first of all, I think because it’s not just that you are eloquent and articulate; it’s because you have to write it down, and that people have the time to read it leisurely and to think about it. I read seminar papers and I’m very serious about it in my study. I check the footnotes. I check the tables. I recalculate the figures. I do it for the students, I do it for colleagues; no difference. I do it for undergraduates.

In fact, I have a colleague and our students are always saying, those in common, “It doesn’t make sense taking classes from both of you, because you tend to make the same sort of comments on the papers.” Invariably, once we see tables, we go to our calculators. [Laughter] We are checking them, you know.

One should use statistics not like a drunk uses a light pole for support, but for illumination. And if it’s not illuminating the argument, then the cosmetic aspect can be dispensed
with. The fact is that there must be something why you’re going to force the reader to look at all of this material.

And people are surprised when we do that, because quite often—and we all are—you get very fond of things, a quotation, a table, a chart, especially now that the computer generates these nice graphics, and you get carried away with the graphics. There is a point at which there is excess, and it then weakens or, shall I say, detracts from what you really want your reader to do, just to focus on the argument you want to make. And anything that does that has to be dispensed with. I have a lot of very fond ideas which are by the wayside, you know, cut, thrown out, but it’s the nature of the exercise.

Warren: We have been through my list. What haven’t we talked about that a history of your time at Johns Hopkins would be incomplete without talking about?

Knight: Wow.

Warren: I mean, I’m not asking you to tell me everything you’ve done every day.

Knight: Oh, no. No, no.

Warren: But thematically, what haven’t we talked about?

Knight: We haven’t talked about really the role of the history in the university, and that’s very important, because when I came here, history was one of the politically powerful departments. I’m not sure it still is to the same degree, but I do know that when I came here, it was politically powerful. Part of that derived from its ranking.

It has always been a prestigious department in the sense, you know, it has a tradition
going back to Woodrow Wilson and the political science sort of way of doing history here. And it had the Institute of Southern Culture, a very active group, and it was innovative. It brought in, as I said before, the Atlantic studies program, which was very successful. It ran, and still runs, a lot of series of seminars. We just completed an eighteen-month cycle of Sawyer Seminars, which again were well received.

Why is it my perception it’s not as politically powerful? I think, again, because we went through a phase where the economics forced our attention towards revenue-producing measures, and history is not a revenue-enhancing or revenue-producing section of the university. So places like Applied Physics Laboratory, obviously, or the whatever it’s now called, School of Continuing Education, got a lot of attention because they are revenue-producing at a time when this is an important area of activity.

I’m not saying that wasn’t wrong, but I think that the university has to be seen as larger than the sum of its parts, and it is important, and I think it’s now perceived by the new dean that you have to make a decision, a strategic decision, whether you maintain your strengths in a system in which some people have to be unequal or you try to find everybody at the lowest common denominator and have an artificially enforced equality.

Both of those can be justified on moral grounds, but the consequence of those types of action are entirely different. You have a mediocre university if you have all departments no stronger than the weakest department, rather than say that you will maintain the quality and the strength of your strongest department and endeavor, hoping that you will pull up the others by that action, although some of those are difficult, difficult departments to change. And difficult, I
say, only because if you have a department already constructed and you don’t have a lot of resources, you can’t make it larger.

If the people are tenured, you can’t throw them out at will, and sometimes they’re not amenable to the type of persuasion, friendly persuasion, that falls within the realm of the dean or even of colleagues, and that’s a problem, especially now that there is no mandatory retirement, which I think is a bad idea. I think institutions must have new life blood, even if it means progressively changing the institution, but it’s imperative that new people be brought into an institution, any institution, at regular intervals. And I think that Hopkins must be sensitive to that. I mean, we have this demographic. There’s so many people in my age group here, that between now and the year 2010, if we opt to retire at the normal retirement age, there’s going to be tremendous turnover. I think we should make an attempt to spread out the demographic profile a little, a more organic sort of profile.

**Warren:** Just put a gangplank out and get people up there, ready to jump off?

**Knight:** That would be good, if that’s necessary. [Laughter] But I think there are more humane ways of doing it, creative incentives about what it is that allows people to come into the institution. For example, I was in Germany at a conference some weeks ago, and there they have the same problem. One of the ways they address it is that the most senior professors surrender one-third of their [unclear], one-third of their salary for one-third of their time, and that employs junior people. So that when they retire, you have junior people coming up in the institution.

**Warren:** And you would have some crossover in time there.

**Knight:** Yes, because it’s important if you want to maintain the type of culture, that they be
there at the same time. I thought this was a very creative way. Two people surrendering one-third of their salary is not a tremendous loss to that age group. You no longer have kids in college and so on. It adequately compensates a junior person coming up through the ranks. There are other ways it can be done. I think that part of the endowment could be devoted to this. Faculty creation is an important part. Some of the other ways are providing options, attractive options to people who reach that age group. You go off in different activities other than full-time faculty. So I think it can be addressed, and it is being considered. It might eventually be successful.

Warren: I want to thank you. You have been most generous with your time. Thank you, Dr. Knight.

Knight: Thank you for having me.

Warren: My pleasure entirely. [Tape recorder turned off.]

All right. We’re back, and we’re talking about the eccentrics.

Knight: I think that every institution produces people who are a little different from the normal run of activity and people who are there. And they’re eccentric in a funny sort of way. When I was a kid, we used to say “funny peculiar” and “funny ha-ha.” So if I use this, they would be “peculiar ha-ha.”

They’re not people who are—they just think in a different sort of operation than we can. And these are people who, when they come to a seminar, are always going to ask the question that nobody else sort of asks or it occurred to anyone to ask. They will make the type of connections that ordinary people would find it hard to do. Even in their [unclear], their seminars, their own work, they’re a little beyond the fringe in what they do. These are people who, I think,
make a real big difference intellectually to the institution.

There is certainly—I have always thought that David Spring was one such eccentric. He worked on English gentry and landed systems of the eighteenth century, and he tended to be narrowly sort of English historian, but he was interested in all sorts of things. Here is David, that I’ve known for a lot of years, and after many, many years, David came to my office one day and said, “What do you know about Jamaican reggae?”

I said, “Oh, David, I don’t know much about Jamaican reggae. It’s a new form of music that developed there.”

And he says, “Well, I have this collection of reggae,” and he really did know about Jamaican reggae and started to instruct me, a Jamaican, on Jamaican reggae. Now, if you saw David, you couldn’t think that David, (A), could appreciate this type of popular music and, (B), would ever be interested in this type of popular music, but here it was. He was fascinated by this.

I have spoken about Dick Macksey, and Dick Macksey’s eccentricity is widespread. Macksey is the type of guy who, in an exam, will say, “This reminds me of this Italian poet,” and then proceeds to recite in Italian this poetic allusion that he’s making. And he would always begin by saying, “I’m not sure I remember it.” And then you remember that this guy is reciting minutes and minutes in a foreign language of poetry that you’d never heard about. This is the type of thing which I like.

Reds [Wolman] would always come in with an experience. Reds’ had more unusual experiences in more unusual parts of the world than anybody else, in fact, than any explorer, I think, ever had.
Warren: Tell me what you mean.

Knight: Well, Red would say, "There was a time we were in Egypt, we were supposed to be consulting on the water system," I think that Hopkins or Reds and company did the Cairo water systems. And he's talking about a Cairo that's in the '40s and '50s; it's not a modern Cairo at all. You're talking about waves of people where you have scientists trying to do measurements and carry on all these types of activities in a population that isn't accustomed to these instruments or even these Westerners doing things like that. And Reds is quite unfazed by all this, you know, his stuff knocked over by camels or crowds of people indifferent to what he's doing. And he's never, never fazed by these novelties; he just describes it, "I walked across the campus and I saw such and such."

And you'd say, "I'm not sure that I could, with the dust and the flies and all these sorts of things."

"Yes, there was dust. Yes, there were flies, but that's not the important thing."

I'd say, "I'm not sure I could do this." Or the different diseases you'd pick up when you go to these places. All these new experiences. Most people, I think, and certainly I could not do things like these, and these are experiences which they internalize, which gives them a richness, especially in their narration. But there is no situation you can think of that Reds has not come close to experiencing, other than death and these terminal ones, and yet he has a calmness about it. You say, "Weren't you scared? Wasn't this difficult, dangerous?" And that's the time he's realizing, "Yes, it might have been." I'm saying, "Wow!"

That's what I call about this delightful "ha-ha" eccentricity among people. I think, one, is
that these people do travel a lot. They’re not afraid of novelty, of the new, that they don’t speak
the language, it doesn’t faze them, that they don’t know the area. It seems to appeal to them.
They just go because it’s a job or they’re just curious about that sort of thing.

I think we’re having less of those types of people. I am absolutely appalled that there is a
fellow in my field, or claims he’s in my field, of Latin American studies, who’s been to no more
than two countries in the region, and one of those for less than two weeks. And he claims he’s an
expert on it. This is unacceptable to me.

I think that if you’re going to instruct people in the field, you’d better know about it, and
it’s more than you can read in books. It’s not that you have to go there, but I think you have to be
able to empathize, and it helps. I think it helps when I can say to my students, “You know, if you
go to Buenos Aires today, it’s not worth going to the c____florida anymore, because everybody
goes to shopping centers, so you may as well go, if you want to talk to Argentineans, where they
are. On the other hand, if what are the tango places, then c____florida still is a tango place.”
That mightn’t be very, very important to them, but I can tell you that no matter what you tell
them about the archives, they will remember more about c____florida than they will about
whether it’s good to work in the archives in Buenos Aires or not. That, in any case, they
inevitably have to do.

Or when I talk about Madrid or I talk about Germany or I talk about Mexico, I can
invariably relate to some scholar who lives there that I really know very well, or I can say, “If
you’re there, you must see that person, because he’s the best guy to introduce you to this field.”
And I think that’s what, at the level of graduate instruction, Hopkins should be about. It’s what it
used to be about. We send our students to Africa, Latin America, to Asia. Of course they go to Europe and they go across the United States. Because we think that there is a dimension, a qualitative dimension, that’s got from exposing yourself to the situation in the field at that time, at a formative time of your career. It’s indispensable to future success in the field.

Sometimes, of course, it turns you off. We’ve had students who, having made these preliminary trips, decide this is what they could never do for the rest of their lives. And we think that this is an investment well made at that critical time, because it saves us down the road spending five years with the student, only to hear that having got the Ph.D., they no longer what to do Latin American history or something like that. It happens sometimes, but less often when they can make that decision in the first and second year by going somewhere else.

**Warren:** You were talking about Reds Wolman. When the tape recorder was off, you were saying that he had grown up here.

**Knight:** Yes.

**Warren:** Can you say what you were saying then?

**Knight:** Yes. Reds is the living institutional history, because Reds is the son of a Hopkins professor, who also became a distinguished Hopkins professor. So he has been, from birth, related to Hopkins. In fact, I think the alumni office is in his father’s house. Isn’t that the Wolman–

**Warren:** The Steinwald House?

**Knight:** No, no, it’s the one next door. It used to be a dean’s. His father’s house is now a part of the Hopkins institutions on North Charles. The alumni house is Steinwald house. It’s the house
next door which used to be his house, which is now a set of offices. But that’s been the house that Reds grew up in, and that house must go back to the turn of the century, because that must certainly be about no later than 1920 construction. And so when you talk to Reds, he has two dimensions which are hard to get. He has the student and child’s view of the place, growing up, which is always a little different from an adult and internal faculty view. And he can bring these together.

I think that’s why he was so successful all along at understanding both the students, graduate and undergraduate, and faculty views. And he was the best mediator that I have seen on this campus. He was more responsive, more sensitive to diverse faculty opinions and could bring people together easier than anyone else I can think of offhand, because he was the one person that every single person that I met on this campus respected, respected professionally and respected personally. Because there are times you can respect them professionally but loathe them personally. But Reds was the one—there might be others, but he’s the one that I think of, that comes to mind, that everyone would say, “We respect Reds.”

And also as I have done, and I’m a relative newcomer to Hopkins, even though I’ve been here twenty-seven years, Reds is the type of guy that I’d wander in his office when I had a problem—I have done this—and just sort of passed it by him, and he would invariably think about it and give you real solid advice, because the advice he is giving you was always institutionally contextualized. He would know how this would play. He would know if this is a good idea or not a bad idea because either you couldn’t get faculty support for this or you should get faculty support for this, or even if you wouldn’t get faculty support for it, but it’s worth ventilating. And
these are the types of things he would quite calmly give.

He loved the place. That’s another thing. Reds stayed here because he really loved Hopkins. A lot of people of that generation, I think, really loved Hopkins and had a different sense of affiliation than now. Today we’re sort of—there is institutional loyalty and individual loyalty, but it’s not as strong, because people now more and more see themselves as professionals within a national, international organization, and it doesn’t matter whether you’re at Hopkins or at Podunk, once you have that public persona.

And I think I disagree with that, because as I said earlier, I do feel that there is an institutional culture which is really very, very important. Someone can say that, “I think that person is a Hopkins,” or, “It doesn’t surprise me that that person is a Hopkins person,” or, “It doesn’t surprise me that that’s a Wisconsin person.” I think it does communicate that there’s something they share, that they could discern, that was common to that institution which would have been different if they had gone somewhere else.

Okay?

**Warren:** We could go on all day, but I am going to let you go.

**Knight:** Yes, I should go.

**Warren:** Thank you so much.

[End of interview]