

NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Dr. Hutchinson Interview

Interview Two: Department Heads

Paul D. Alto

Paul: Alrighty, October first. One sixteen p.m. Gries Hall. Let's start out with your name please.

Dr. Hutchinson: Ira Walter Hutchinson the third.

Paul: And your birthday?

Dr. Hutchinson: October nineteenth, nineteen forty-three.

Paul: And your department affiliation?

Dr. Hutchinson: Department of Sociology and Social work.

Paul: Alright, excellent. Were you born around here?

Dr. Hutchinson: No, I was born in southern Ohio.

Paul: Alright, that's quite a big change from around here.

Dr. Hutchinson: Actually I was born in southern Ohio but lived for many years in downstate Michigan in Midland.

Paul: Okay, I was kind of the same thing too; and then the school that you attended for you degree?

Dr. Hutchinson: Well, I got my bachelors degree at Michigan State and then my masters and doctorate both came from the University of Notre Dame.

Paul: Excellent, excellent; and what made you decide on Sociology?

Dr. Hutchinson: (Laughter) Well I'll have to make this long story short. I started out in college at U of M thinking I was going to be a physicist, and that didn't last long. I think really I just wasn't smart enough, and so after a while I ended up at Michigan State and decided I'd be a social studies teacher in high school and three weeks into my student teaching; really in pretty good classes, in a pretty good school in Saginaw I decided I would never do that again. (laughter) So I went back to my advisor at Michigan State and I said "I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm supposed to graduate in ten weeks." And he said, "What do you want to do?" And I said, "Well I thought I wanted to teach, but now there's too much about high school that's not teaching. You know there's hall monitoring, lunch monitoring and passes and after school activities and parent teachers." I said, "I don't want to do that stuff. I just want to teach." And he said, "Well, why don't you teach college?" And I said, "Huh, what would I have to do to do that?" And he said, "Well, you'll have to get a Ph. D." And I said, "How long will that take?" and he said "Oh, about four or five years." And I said, "Ok, well what do you think I ought to do it in?" And he said, "Was there anything that you really liked when you were here?" And I said, "Yeah, I really liked sociology and I had done well in it. I'd even taken some graduate level classes and I had done very well in those." And he said, "Well, why don't you take sociology?" And I said, "Ok." And I said, "Where do you think I ought to apply? And he said, "Why don't you apply at Northwestern and Purdue and Notre Dame?" and he mentioned four or five schools and I said, "Ok." And so I did. And a fifteen minute conversation changed my life. Paul, I think that most people in sociology don't start in sociology. I think

we by and large come to it from other areas and either because we got disenchanted by the other areas or we learn more about ourselves and our interests change. I'd be very surprised if you talked to a hundred sociologists, say that teach at the university level; I'd be very surprised if any more than ten of them said, "Oh they just knew for years they wanted to be a sociologist." People, you don't even know about sociology until you're at least in high school. It's not a visible profession like a lot of other things.

Paul: Even though it so, well, it's what we do.

Dr. Hutchinson: Well it is what we do, yes, yup.

Paul: Alright, well we already covered your choice of other schools, and you were saying you attended these other classes, other colleges for their sociology program. How would that compare to ours? I know those are all larger universities and such.

Dr. Hutchinson: You mean comparing the departments? Or comparing the universities?

Paul: Comparing the departments.

Dr. Hutchinson: Okay, well, you know Michigan State is huge. I don't know that the enrollment is now. When I was there it was around forty-thousand. So they had an enormous sociology department and when you have large departments and large universities, people can really work in their specialty areas. So you might have three or four people that only study crime and three or four people that only study Family sociology, Family sociology is my area, and in a large department in they can cover all of the sub-specialties. This isn't as true with Notre Dame cause that was a much smaller department than State but it was bigger than Northern's. I don't know how many sociology faculty were there when I was there; probably ten or fifteen; even though in this department of twelve people we've really only got six sociologists. So when you have few, small number of people, one consequence is that people teach in areas that really aren't their expertise. And the other consequence is we can't offer all subject. I mean we, right now for example we don't have a course in Environmental sociology; we don't have a course in Feminist sociology; we don't have a course in International sociology. I could probably name twenty courses off the top of my head that I wish we could offer if we had the staff, but we don't have the staff. So the, I think that the faculty here is just as hard working and just as good at Michigan State of Notre Dame but, it's different kind of schools because Michigan, Northern really is by and large a teaching institution and Michigan State was part teaching, part research; and the same for Notre Dame. And so the faculty had lighter teaching loads that they do here but much, much more heavy research loads. Research and publish, so here we, in the last five years we've seen a little bit more emphasis on research and publishing but still, by and large we're a teaching institution. So it's easier to compare Michigan State with Notre Dame than either of those two with Northern. Because our missions are really, really different.

Paul: That actually leads into the other question. So is it, it is pretty hard to find time to do research on your own projects?

Dr. Hutchinson: Well, do you want me to speak from the position of a faculty member of a department head?

Paul: That's your own choice.

Dr. Hutchinson: Okay, well as I mentioned the faculty teaching load here and this is true of all faculty that are on the universities' contract. The normal load is twelve hours a semester, and I think particularly for the young faculty who are trying to get their careers started and especially teaching courses for the first time requires a tremendous amount of preparation. So if they are trying to do that, and do research, and write papers for publication and go to professional meetings, and contribute service work to the university or the community. That's a lot of hours in a day. I think that it's very, very demanding. I think that after somebody has been here for a few years and if they are teaching many of the same courses, I don't think their schedules are full as they once were and so some of the faculty that are sorta energetic, "go-getter" faculty are gonna be working like crazy people all the time. No matter what the demands are. Other people are gonna frankly, they're gonna slow down. They've got their courses under their belts pretty well. They may not be doing much research and publishing and so I think it becomes much, much more manageable as a job. For department heads, this is the first time I've ever been a department head; and one of my fears was that I wouldn't have time to do research and publishing, and those fears have somewhat been realized. My assignment is half and half; half-time teaching, half-time research and professional work. So whatever time I have to do that, I have to squeeze in, or find other time to do it. So I think that at Northern it's very, very difficult to do all three. Just because there are a lot of demands. This is my fortieth year. Every almost every single year for forty years I've been always involved in some sort of research or writing activity. I'm still writing papers for a publication. Still getting papers published and still going to professional meetings. I'm going to one next month. It's harder at Northern to do that, (laughter) frankly, it's more tiring.

Paul: Yeah, I can definitely see that. How are the other administrators; I guess your higher-ups?

Dr. Hutchinson: Okay, you mean in terms of my relationship with them or?

Paul: Are they understandable with your time restraints?

Dr. Hutchinson: No, I don't think they keep loading us up. I mean, I think that my dean, Dr. Lang is very respectful and honors my desire to do research and be professionally involved. In occasion I've had a course release order to do that. And when I got, a few years ago I got a grant from the Blue Cross Blue Shield foundation of Michigan. It was a project that we felt that was gonna take two years and it ended up taking three and a half. It was to produce a documentary on alcohol and men's violence against women. Because this is my specialty area is family violence and so the grant provided for a course release each semester during the length of the grant. So I had less of a teaching load but more of a research load. So you know no matter what you do your plate is pretty full. I don't have the sense that the administration expects me to do more and more. In the last two to three years I have said "no" more often to being on committees because committees take a lot of work. I mean some committees take a lot of work and I don't want to be on a committee unless I can do a good job so, I've just said "no."

Paul: This is something I was wondering. You said earlier that there were only six sociologists here. Now you're speaking of there are anthropologists...

Dr. Hutchinson: Okay, yeah and after I said that I thought, that isn't right, there are five and a half of us.

Paul: Okay.

Dr. Hutchinson: There are five full time sociologists and I'm counted as a half time sociologist because I also teach sociology. There is four social worker faculty and there are two anthropology faculty. Now does that bring us up to eleven or twelve? Twelve, okay so including me we have twelve people. But actually we have the equivalent of eleven and a half people who are assigned to teach.

Paul: Does that, do your disciplines get along very well?

Dr. Hutchinson: (Laughter) This is a bad day to be asking that question Paul.

Paul: (laughter)

Dr. Hutchinson: Alright, ninety percent of the time yes. Every once and a while issues arise and people, some people not everybody, sort of retreats into a disciplinary self interest and it's really honestly a struggle sometimes in multi-disciplinary departments. Where what's good for the department overall may not be good for the discipline and then, you know? Twelve people, you're bound to have arguments and sometimes the arguments are intense but as far as I know everybody's still speaking to everybody else. We don't have anybody slamming doors in people's faces. I've been in departments where there were established cliques and people have actually hated each other but not this one and this will blow over. (Coughing) Excuse me. So most of the time we get along just fine but you know it's like (coughing) I don't know what kind of family you grew up in. I grew up in a family of seven brothers and sisters. Most of the time we got along just fine; every once in a while you'd have this person mad at this person, or that person mad at these two people (coughing). You know, we're human.

Paul: Do you want me to take a break?

Dr. Hutchinson: I'm just gonna pop this cough drop in my mouth Paul.

Paul: Okay, and going back now. After you did graduate and you got your Ph. D, what made you decide to come here?

Dr. Hutchinson: Actually I didn't come here then.

Paul: Okay,

Dr. Hutchinson: My first teaching position was in Florida State University in Tallahassee. Even though I said as a Northerner I said this to myself I would never ever live in the South. I thought to myself, "Well Florida isn't part of the South. But the fact is northern Florida, which is where Tallahassee is, is the South. I ended up staying there seven years teaching in a combined department. It was the, well it was, the department was the Department of Sociology but we had a shared program with Interdisciplinary

Marriage and Family Studies. So we taught in that program. We taught only doctoral students. So to get in the program you already had to have your bachelors, you already had to have your masters. So this was a very specialized program. So from there I went to the University of South Carolina Charlotte. Which was just about the size as Northern is now. To join the sociology department that was in Nineteen seventy seven thinking that I was staying there for five to six years than move on because years ago the common pattern was to stay at the place for five to six years than to move on. I ended up staying there for twenty-three years.

Paul: Wow.

Dr. Hutchinson: Instead of five or six. So I got tenure, got promoted and due to a number of factors, I grew increasingly disenchanted with Charlotte and big cities in general and most of my brothers and sisters were back in Michigan so for two or three years I had my eyes out for moving back to Michigan. But you know, most universities are interested in hiring beginning assistant professors and it's pretty difficult to find positions for tenured track professors. Frankly we cost more. We're high ticket items. And so I saw the job add for Northern Michigan and honestly, I'm embarrassed to say this I'm not even sure I knew where Marquette was, when I decided to apply for the position. Because what they were looking for was a part time department head and department teacher. And even though I said for thirty years, I had been at the university level for thirty years, even though I said to myself "I'm never ever, gonna be a department head, ever". I thought "Well, it's only half time. So that was in, that was in, must have been the spring of two-thousand, and so I came up here for the interview and they liked me well enough, and I liked them well enough and decided to take the plunge. I mean it's actually; it's quite difficult, I believe to move, when you're well into your career. But I had seen, I had seen too many people in their fifties in the university to start slowing down and getting ready for retirement ten years before they retired, and I didn't want to do that. What attracted me about Northern was, I mean of course being on the shore of Lake Superior, but I was really ready to get back to a smaller school. Because the time I had been at UNCC the student body had doubled in size. We didn't have enough resources and a lot of traffic congestion and blah blah blah. So I wanted a smaller school. I wanted smaller classes frankly. I had been routinely teaching classes of a hundred and fifty, and many semesters I had two classes like that. You know it's just, I realized that not only was I not learning students name I wasn't learning their faces. In a big class like that it gets harder and harder to do that. So, Northern was a very good choice. I'm glad I made the move.

Paul: You said earlier that you told yourself that you would never be a department head.

Dr. Hutchinson: Right, right.

Paul: Did you just, you said you were half of one, did you just get pushed into the job?

Dr. Hutchinson: Well, by virtue of the fact that I applied. See when universities advertise positions they have to state what the requirements are. So by virtue of me applying for the job, that's pretty much an indicator that I'm accepting that part of the job. So no, I can't say I got pushed into it. I applied for the job of being department head and actually at Northern, department heads are not considered part of the faculty. We're considered part of the administration. This is unusual for me in that respect because

my other universities department heads are part of the faculty. But here, we're considered part of the administration. Which really honestly bothers me. After being a faculty member for so long it's just strange to think of myself as not part of the faculty group. So Paul, I can't say I knew what I was getting into. Because I hadn't been a department head before, but you know the things that I expected to drive me crazy aren't in fact the things that drive me crazy. It's not paperwork, budget crisis, committee meetings that go on to long. You know, I think that department heads job ideally would be planning and leadership. But in reality much of it is problem solving; putting out fires, listening to complaints. When you can do something about them, you do something about them.

Paul: Alright, and you were talking earlier about how you got tenure at other universities. What's your opinion on that, tenure in general?

Dr. Hutchinson: On the principal of being tenured and whether or not it's a good thing?

Paul: Yeah. And is it actually, is that the way it works out most of the time?

Dr. Hutchinson: Do you mean if most people get tenured?

Paul: If it works out how it's ideally planned?

Dr. Hutchinson: Okay well, you've probably have done enough of your homework to know that the basic argument for tenure is so a faculty member can have academic freedom to speak as he or she wishes without interference of threat of job loss or administration. I think that's totally a really important principal. Do you need tenure when you've also got a unionized university? Because at a unionized university there's many, many, many, many safeguards for faculty to not be subject to arbitrary action by administrators. The union contract I think virtually guarantees that. So, if I were going to be around for another twenty or twenty-five years I'd, if I were a faculty member I would say, "Certainly tenure is essential." But if I was going to be around as an administrator and I had my choice, which I don't I would say, "No, I don't think it is essential." Let's move towards the long term contracts. You know after you've been here for four or five years with satisfactory performance we'll give you a series of six-year contracts which are renewable every six years. So it's not permanent, guaranteed employment. Right, right now, once somebody has tenure, this is true of any university; it's virtually impossible, almost impossible to get rid of somebody for underperformance. So every university has people, that get tenured and after that they slow down and do the minimum they have to do to get by. My opinion is that cheats the students, it cheats the profession, and it cheats the university. I've been lucky. I've been in universities where I've never felt the administration has been out to screw the faculty or you know; take advantage of the faculty or anything else. If I'd been in a place like that I might be a rallier and a flag carrier for tenure but, I think especially at unionized universities I don't think we need them for most faculty.

Paul: On the subject of the union. What are your viewings on it? Do you like the university being unionized? Or do you think that perhaps it's; is there any real reason for a union?

Dr. Hutchinson: Oh yeah Paul, I think that there are a lot of reasons for a union. And in answer to your question do I like the fact that it's unionized? I think it would depend on the day that you ask me and what's going on. Many times I feel like that having a strong union and having a good con..., a good union contract is a huge advantage. I mean for example: At my former universities salary merit increases were based on a recommendation of a faculty review committee to the department head. Then the department head would determine what the merit increase for that year would be. It puts a tremendous amount of pressure on the department head to be as fair as you can while recognizing that some people perform better and more than other people. But at a union university, like this, the department head has no discretion over salary increases. Because salary increases are totally and absolutely determined by the union contract. So a department head could have Jane Jones in the department who's just really creative and her teaching evaluations are wonderful and she's going to professional meetings and working in the community and publishing and she's just knocking herself out and she's always available for students and she gets exactly the same salary increase, percentage wise, as does the laziest person in that department. Is that fair? I don't know, it doesn't matter if it's fair or not. So there's things for which I'm really glad but I'm glad I don't have to make those decisions. But other times and right now the union has rejected the proposal contract and so there's a lot of tension over that and I think there's, for some people a lot of sentiment of us against them. And you know if I were a faculty member maybe I'd be angry and hostile too and maybe I'd be suspicious. There's a lot of suspiciousness among some of the faculty towards administrators and administrative decisions and you know the bottom line is that Michigan's in terrible shape economically, and hardly any faculty, and this is no criticism it's just a statement, hardly any are paying attention to what the university and state budgets are going to be like two or three years from now. They only understand how this crisis is affecting them right now. But university planners absolutely have to plan on that. I mean in almost every single department head committee meeting I go to, not everyone, there is some talk "what's it look like two years from now?" So, that's my thought on unions.

Paul: Alright, now being the administrator in your department do you mainly work by yourself? Or you were saying the heads get together and have a meeting like.

Dr. Hutchinson: Well, let me make a distinction here.

Paul: Okay.

Dr. Hutchinson: Within the department our department, not all departments are organized like this, but within this department there's an executive committee and I meet with the executive committee usually about once a month. Sometimes more, sometimes less, it depends on what's going on. And the executive committee is composed of a representative from anthropology, sociology and social work. Because even though I'm a sociologist our bylaws say that I cannot represent sociology. In other words I'm hired to be a department head, not to be a sociologist. Because if I was representing the sociologists; then I might represent them more than the anthropologist or social workers. So the executive committee is composed of a representative and ideally the representative of the executive committee brings up the concerns of that component. So for example: right now we might be hiring another assistant professor of sociology, maybe. That's just a possibility. And this is the business of the whole

department. But it's mainly the business of sociology and those faculty. So the sociologists in this case will take the lead and then other people will join them. So we, each of the components has their own meetings, I mean and we, unlike other departments we don't have many department meetings. Where everybody gets together because the sociologist all just have their meeting, the social workers have their meeting, and the anthropologist have their meeting. And only when we need to get together, as one group, do we do so because the real business of the department is mainly handled through the components. You know the curriculum issues, and the curriculum revisions and things like that. Now what I referred to before by external relationship is that in the college and professional studies we have meetings once or twice a month for all the department heads and the college professional studies. I think there are eight or nine of us. And I'm assuming the other colleges do the same thing. And then once a month all the department heads and the deans and the directors of programs get together for a larger meeting and that's with the provost.

Paul: Alright.

Dr. Hutchinson: You're probably learning more about the university than you ever wanted to know.
(laughter)

Paul: (Laughter) So, actually you were mentioning earlier that it might be a good time for this idea. How do you think the department is going to fend with your presence not being here? Do you think they're going to do alright?

Dr. Hutchinson: (Chuckle) Yeah, I think they're gonna do just fine Paul. I mean we're going through some turmoil right now trying to define "what's the kind of person that we want to get next." But I think they're going to be fine. You know anybody, including department heads that think, they're so arrogant to think they're indispensable have another thing coming. You know, there will be a transition. Just as there was a transition when I came in, and when I came in two-thousand the biggest problem was not changing department heads but the woman who had been secretary of the department for twenty-eight years retired. And so the department started out with a new department secretary and a new department head at the same time. That was a disaster. Because neither one of us really knew anything.

Paul: Yeah.

Dr. Hutchinson: You know, and so every other day I was going down the hall to ask one of the more senior faculty "what have you done with this before, and what have you done with that before?" So you know there is a learning curve and even if the next department head has been a department head somewhere else, you know there are procedures here, and policies and you know, things that we do that, that person is going to have to learn. You know, I think the first few months might be a little bit rocky. But I think after that, yeah, everybody is going to be just fine.

Paul: Is there anything that you would like to see done in your department before you leave or after you go?

Dr. Hutchinson: Well, yeah, yeah there is. And we've been talking about this for awhile but I, when I first started teaching there was a very popular poster and I don't even, I can't even associate this with what was going on in society at the time. But there was a very popular poster that hung on a lot of faculty doors was this statement: "When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's hard to remember your original intention was to drain the swamp." I, and so a medium length version of the answer to that question, Yeah we've got a strategic plan, like all departments do, we've got things we want to do. I'd really, really love it if the department disciplines would get together, and there are some possibilities that this is going to happen, and agree that: this is the thing that is going to define our department. And the thing that's going to define the department might be development of knowledge and information about peoples of the Upper Peninsula, or the Midwest, or the Great Lakes region or something like that. There would be an anthropology component, and a sociology component, and a social work component. Not that we're all doing team research projects with it. That what we do as a department distinguishes us from other departments at other universities and that this is our niche. Here is, this is what we specialize in. And I think there would be a lot of support for that in the department. Now what, that is a goal. But in the real world, people have their courses to teach, their conference papers to write. They have the budget crisis to work out. They have family problems, or problems at home. They have this, and they have that. So, even if there is a good solid agreement that this is how we want to move forward. Actually doing that may be difficult because you have these alligators snapping at your ass. And you know the alligators are class sizes being too big, uncertainty about resources. Can we count on having money for student stipends? If someone wants to hire a work study student, well we can do that right now but can we do that next year? Don't know what the budget's going to be. Actually we don't even have our budget this year. So we're spending now, we're now spending money that I'm pretty sure we have. But I don't know that for a fact. So it's a good question. The university, you know, has it's road map to two-thousand fifteen. And the departments selected two of those areas primarily but three of the four road map areas. So this is where we could be really good. We think we could be really good at internationalization which is part of innovation. We think we'd be really good a community engagement because we already are, and we think we could be good at helping develop the meaningful lives area. So, you know it's goals and reality. But you know, that's just what life is. When you think about your career, your goals and god willing you will accomplish many of your goals. But goals never take into account what reality factors you're going to have to deal with. Did that sound like an old man talking?

Paul: No, (laughter) that was pretty good.

Dr. Hutchinson: (Laughter)

Paul: It's a wise answer I guess, you know.

Dr. Hutchinson: Remember the alligators.

Paul: (Laughter) Do you have another class to get to at noon?

Dr. Hutchinson: No, but I do have some other things to do this afternoon so probably we won't go on a whole lot longer if that's okay with you.

Paul: Alright, no actually I was just going to say I can give you my last question right now.

Dr. Hutchinson: Okay.

Paul: Alright, this is a pretty general question but if you had the opportunity to do it all over again would you have still taken the paths to have come here and become the department head?

Dr. Hutchinson: Absolutely, no question about it. I think if I look back at my career the only significant piece I would change is not staying so long in a place where I was teaching large lecture sections because I love teaching. I really love teaching. I love college students. I discovered when I taught high school I really don't like high school students so much. I just don't like age group. But I'm crazy about college students. I especially like teaching when I get to know some of the people in my classes and when I have large classes it's really hard to do that. So I spent half my career, over half my career teaching in a school with very large classes. That's probably my only regret. That I didn't find a smaller school, with smaller classes sooner; that I didn't take more initiative to break away from what I was used to. But not regrets about coming up here. Wish I would have came up here twenty years ago instead of ten years ago.

Paul: Thank you sir for your time.

Dr. Hutchinson: You're very welcome.