

Dr. Nicholson interview Transcript

Oct 8th, 2009

Interviewed by Jeff Outinen

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Q: Dr. Nicholson, could you please tell us your name and title?

A: Howard L. Nicholson, PhD in American History at Northern Michigan University.

Q: What is your birthday?

A: January 1, 1950.

Q: Where are you from?

A: Originally East Central Indiana.

Q: What got you interested in your discipline?

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Q: Where did you attend college?

A: My undergraduate degree is from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. I have a master's degree from Ball State as well, a master's degree from Indiana University, and PhD from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Q: When and how did you get your first higher education teaching position?

A: The first one in higher education was at Northern in the fall of 2000.

Q: What was your first job in education?

A: That one is a series of daily assignments in 1977 and early 1978, with the Indianapolis school system as a substitute teacher. As a contracted teacher, August 1978 as a secondary social studies teacher in Kokomo, Indiana. I was there from 1978 till 1985.

Q: What did you do after 1985?

A: From '85 till '87, I worked on my PhD at Miami University and was an adjunct of history for Miami, both on their Oxford campus and on their regional campuses in Middletown and Hamilton. In '88 I worked as an adjunct instructor for Indiana University of Kokomo, and then from late '93 to 2000, at

the Alabama School of Mathematics and Sciences, a state preparatory school agency in Mobile, Alabama. Then Northern [Michigan University] in the August of 2000.

Q: What brought you to Marquette and Northern?

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the Alabama School of Mathematics and Sciences, a state preparatory school agency in Mobile, Alabama. Then Northern [Michigan University] in the August of 2000.

Q: What brought you to Marquette and Northern?

A: Northern's reputation on teacher training. Universities and Colleges, have special niches, things that their well known for. The University of Michigan has a long list of all kinds of things in areas that is great at. It's the same for the University of Wisconsin, Michigan State, and Indiana University. Northern, in particular, is its teacher training. Northern was founded at the end of the 19th century as a teacher training institution as a normal school, which was a term used in the Midwest for being a teacher training beginning in the twentieth century. I saw the job position, I know hold, advertised in the fall of 1999. I had a pretty good idea of what it was and applied. By the time I got called for the interview, I knew an awful lot about Northern's history. In terms of teacher training, Northern, there no place in the country that's better. There may be institutions that are just as good, but in teacher training there is none that is better, in my opinion. That was my attraction to Northern, its historic reputation in teacher training.

Q: You are involved in both the Education and History Departments, correct?

A: Correct.

Q: Could you please explain what your position involves?

A: Well first of all you have to go back to this concept of the normal school, training teachers. That has always been the heart and soul of Northern's mission. There are two models for teacher training that are used in the United States. One model is typically associated with former normal schools; the other model is not as much. One model is that people who want to be high school teachers are trained exclusively by the school of education and their professors, that is the model for example that Indiana University uses and the University of Michigan uses. On the other hand there is another model that future high school teachers are trained jointly by the school of education and the content departments. The education professors do the intro up to the last methods course, and then it flips over to the content department. Each content department has someone that has a very special set of credentials. Somebody that has a PhD in content, in my case American History, and a tremendous number of years of High school, middle school teaching experience. In my case it is a quarter of a century. The Northern model uses a person like myself to advise, to do the last methods course, to advise placements and evaluations. The people like myself, know high school teaching better than the school of education. The school of education, their professors have a very heavily background in elementary ed, and education as a whole with the particulars about high school classroom management, the needs of 17-18 year olds is a very different something. That's where someone like myself comes in to play. There are similarities to elementary but their very different. Your right that I do serve in two worlds, a foot in each one, you noticed my office is in the History Department, and I have a PhD in History. On the other hand, I have between two and three decades of practical knowledge about the public schools and I'm just as comfortable in that world as I am in the Northern Campus. The world of Marquette Senior High, I knew that world well. It's the other side of me, that's like yeah I know this world, its okay I understand the

good that bad, and all the different angles of that world too. That's what makes someone in a content department in teacher training valuable is having that very earthy experience. Frequently what is done is taking theory from the school of education and tempering it with the realities, the special situations that pop up in real life American high school.

Q: Originally when you applied at Northern, were you applying for a position in the history department or with the history and education department?

A: I applied for the exact position I was hired for, that there is no applying for a generic position. A person applies for a very cut and dry position. In my case, Northern wanted a person with a phd in American history, they wanted somebody with many of secondary experience someone that could operate as program administrator or secondary ed. social studies within the history department, somebody who could evaluate student teachers, write letters of recommendation, talk to principals and superintendents, helping people get jobs. That is what I was interview for and to also teach history courses.

Q: Could you explain the process that you and the education department need to do to get a student teacher placed in a school?

A: Well first of a student has to complete all content requirements, all the education courses, everything but student teaching. All those credits have to be there and be verified, also minimum g.p.a verified. And then it's not a question of where the student wants to go, it's where a position could be found. Yes, I will look at particulars of extenuating circumstances why, for example I should stay in Marquette County. But Northern students program in history and social students is too large for Marquette County. Only a few people every semester are fortunate enough to stay in the county. What I do is listen to everybody's reason why they want to stay in the county and then decide where people are going to go. Some people are going to be in the county, but not everyone, there are simply not enough slots available in the county. Everybody will get a position so long as their flexible, you can't be rigid and say "I have to have a position in Marquette County", cause there may not be any, but you may have to go Iron Mountain or Escanaba or Munising or whatever. But everybody get ones, by in large which is better in teaching experience, Marquette Senior High or Eben Junction. People in the Upper Peninsula may think Marquette is the big city with the big high school but if you're applying for jobs elsewhere in the country, it's all some little school in Upper Michigan. They don't see any difference between Eben Junction, Ewen Trout Creek or Marquette Senior High; it's all some little school up in the woods. So it all works out, basically.

Q: Are you the only one that goes and observes student teachers?

A: Dr. Logan also does that and on occasion the higher adjuncts. Typically the adjuncts are retired superintendents, principals, class room teachers exclusively, in far off locations who work for us, for example in Green Bay, Ironwood, South of the bridge. Typically I go 100, 150 miles, next semester I'm planning going to Green Bay that would be as far. Last fall I went to Eagle River, Wisconsin. State law requires four evaluation visits, and those evaluation visits spread them over one per month. If a person is struggling, I reserve the right to increase it, it could be 5, 6, 7, 8, and it could be 16 evaluation visits. I

never really have had that many, but by and large it's for evaluation that I go in for an hour and watch a person and critique their style, content knowledge. Again, this is why Northern wants someone who know American history and knows it well, and not just teaching methods, to be able to verify that person is going into the classroom know content and not just methods with content. Content for a high school teacher is very important. Your students are not going to respect you, if they do not believe that you know your content and if they don't respect you, that leads to discipline problems, and they will probably run you out the door, fast.

Q: Is there a favorite school you like to cooperate with for students teachers?

A: Oh not really, typically the ones that don't get many students teachers, because there small or in remote places. Those places are so delighted to get student teachers, that their almost jumping up and down for joy that the secretaries, the principal, it's a very special treat. It's not that any school is in any way less than respectful towards their student teachers and they always take care of them very well, but it's like anything else in this world, if you have stake every day for lunch pretty soon you go ho-hum. So a school that hasn't had a student teacher in 5 to 10 years, this is exciting, especially in a small town, this is big news. Some place that gets a student teacher every other semester and maybe from Northern every semester is not quite as exciting.

Q: Would you say that the enrollment for Social Studies secondary education is high compared to other education areas?

A: The two largest secondary certification programs, and it varies from one semester to the next, but there always neck and neck; but its English and Social Studies. We are the two largest programs. You are right the 350 methods course, and granted some of those people are history minors, you're looking at a large number of people and those are going to be student teachers. By in large Americans like history and English as a society, more than any other areas and it shows up with people saying that they want to be a history teacher, I want to be a social studies teacher, and I want to be an English teacher. More people step forward as freshman say I want to be a chemistry teacher of physics, there are those people, but there's a crying shorting in the United States for math and science teachers, there is no crying shortage for history/ social studies teachers. There's a surplus by and large.

Q: Would you say that there is room for improvement in the department?

A: Well one area that could be improved but as much as anything, it's not a reflection on Northern or the Northern faculty. I think it's something with education of students and that is to listen from day one to the people that are giving them accurate information about the realities of the job market. When students are told, typically people come as campus visitors, that's where first contact is made. The inquiries about being a history/social studies teacher, wants the job market and understanding that just because you're good and graduated, does not mean that you will get a job easily. Now, most people get jobs within 18 months, but they have to do nationwide job searches. That when they are told, that there are limited teaching positions in the Upper Peninsula, it does mean you as a student. Frequently people hear that's it's always somebody else over there; they're the ones it pertains to not me, I'm special. It pertains to you, you are not special. The market is the best it's been for social studies teachers it has

been in 40 something years, but it's still a very tight one. That 30 years ago you couldn't buy a job, literally teaching history, there was only half a dozen in the country every year. The job market now is better, it is, but there are parts of the country where it is horrible, including the Upper Peninsula. There are places that are much better. Up until recently Las Vegas has been pretty good. Summer before last Salt Lake City was pretty good. Suburban Washington D.C. has been pretty good, suburban Atlanta, South Carolina. There are jobs in downstate Michigan and lower Wisconsin, but there are a lot of people applying for them. So I think if there's one area that, and I know the information is there, but it somehow gets lost, people hear but they don't hear. Profession wise, you have to follow your heart, what you're good at, where is your passion. Nobody wants to spend 40 or 50 years on a job and be miserable. But if you do stake your future with history/social studies understand that it can be very good, but you are going to work very hard, and there will be nights when you're shaking your head and saying "why didn't I get that job", "I know I'd be good", "why not". But it's not an easy road to travel, and anybody who thinks it is, people are not going to recruit you for a job, you're going to have to convince the world that you should be hired and not 150 other people. And I know that as a reality, because I have been there, down that road trying to convince people to hire me not everybody else. You have to mark it yourself, the world is not going to say you're special, and you're going to have to prove yourself.

Q: In what direction is your department heading?

A: The history department does a lot of service courses for the liberal studies program. We certainly have our history majors in non-teaching, and they're divided, a lot of those souls they probably need to ask themselves some real questions about what they are going to do with a history degree. There are some individuals that may go to graduate school and some of those may turn that into a career, but that's a small number of people typically. I think across the country some will go to work for state historical agencies, some will go to law school, but a vast number of history grads go into the world of business. And convincing the outside world to hire me, because as a history major I know how to think and I know how to communicate. That is what the history department does at its very best. We're very heavily teacher training; we have our non-teaching people, student majors. That's where I see those people heading, to the outside world, again it's convincing the world why hire you with a history degree from Northern as opposed to somebody else from Michigan State, what makes you special. Well, you better have thought it out, or otherwise you'll go 'I don't know'. Well you are special in the skills that history teaches you. But at times it may take you 20 years to figure this out. But history students are very well prepared; we gather information, we interpret, we analyze, we write, we're communicators, and those are valuable skills in the outside world. There's a reason why, it seems to me, that ever so many insurance agents were history majors. History professors never taught those individuals anything on how to be an insurance agent. But they taught them how to think, analyze, to write. State Farm taught them the nitty gritty of filling out forms for State Farm and the rules about policies, etcetera.

Q: How is the enrollment for the history department?

A: The enrollment in the early part of the decade, jumped in the education arena. That's when I arrived there was only one of me, within the first 5 years the numbers have increased to the point that the

administration was willing to hire another person, tenor tract, and that turned out to be Dr. Logan. Right now when the economy goes down will people head towards teaching or not. There's one way of looking at it, and say yes people would say it's tough getting factory jobs. On the other hand there's a lot of news stories saying, maybe there is not a lot of security with teaching. I haven't seen the numbers fall out of people coming and asking about teaching as a profession, yet and I don't think it will. I think people, many of them, will see teaching as a very viable future. But again, what they're going to have to explain to the world when their done, is 'why hire me', because it will be very competitive, it's always very competitive, sometimes worse than others. And depending on the place, you can imagine how competitive it is, if Marquette Senior High should have a history job open; many, many, many people saying "please hire me".

Q: For someone going into secondary education, and possibly teaching at the college level after a few years of teaching high school, what would one have to do to become a professor in college?

A: Some people will get a teaching license and spend a couple years or three in a public school teaching, and they pay off some bills, understandably so, and head off to graduate school in history and end up with a PhD, and again they have to explain why hire me in higher education and not 100 other people. Most people who want to be University professors don't teach any at the high school level. Most of them will go straight from undergraduate to graduate studies, that's usual. My route is very unusual, that's almost unheard of. That's why there are very few people around the country with my credentials. There a lot of PhD's in history, but very few of them with a quarter of a century high school teaching experience, because people get comfortable and if you start jumping, you start messing with retirement pensions, you have start all over again and there's also a certain bias in higher education. That's terribly unfair but it goes like this, if you were any good why did you go and teach high school to begin with? People who want to be university professors go immediately to graduate school. There is a biased against people who have taught at the high school level, as being inferior. I once had a professor when I was at Miami (Oh) and I was close to being done, and all the graduate students who were finishing up were supposed to do a professional resume and give it to this learned lady and she would call us in, she would tell us what was a good one and how to improve it, a very fine idea. She called me in and she said the resume is quite good, but you have one problem, she said "I see on your resume that you taught high school for 15 years in Indiana, isn't there some way you can get that out of your life? It just doesn't look right". As if I had been in prison, I didn't pay any attention to her, but that is a very real bias. There's nothing wrong with someone saying I got bills to pay, I need a couple years to make some money and then apply for graduate school that works out well. No if a person stays for many years in the public school, you have to fight a lot of discrimination, biases. But if a person survives, then there are some jobs like mine that there aren't that many people who have the credentials for. So you know its half of one, six in the other so to speak.

Q: As a professor at a university, what do you have to do to keep up your qualifications, each year?

A: It depends on the institution and the agenda, so to speak. At northern it can be done in many differ ways, including a traditional scholarship writing, developing new courses, because if you think about its Northern has been a teaching institution first. The University of Michigan is research, Northern's is

teaching. So then a lot of professors have shown a continuing commitment, through the scholarship of teaching, in other words, being good [teachers] in the classroom. I personally find that quite valuable. But it becomes a personal thing, to what an individual deserves.

Q: Have you ever created any new courses here at Northern?

A: I created one very rapidly as a course for this fall; history of the American automobile, which seemed very timely for Michigan to me. It's really a look at the rise and changing nature of the second industrial revolution, through the American automobile.

Q: Are there any courses you would like to add in the future?

A: I got far more obligations than I got time, as much as anything, the course on the automobile seemed timely and I did it, but by and large I am not a person, I think first and foremost the courses that need to be taught. In my case; the history of Mexico, Latin America, U.S. survey, senior seminar, intro to writing. With the education students, I've got far more obligations than there's time that reading of course if fine, it's certainly beneficial, but far as saying I think I need to do this on a very regular basis. If you do that too much you may find yourself, you're not covering some bases that need to be covered, like History of Mexico course, which I am qualified to do, with a masters degree in Latin American studies. All those people with liberal studies credits that needs to be done too. So it's a fine line, creating a new course that's important. But you can't forget the old standard bases need to be covered too, first and foremost. In terms of personal enrichment, it's interesting lecturing on industrialization through the automobile. At the same time survey of United States history can be pleasurable too.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

A: I plan on continuing this combination of teaching obligations with student teacher placements and evaluations. In the terms of courses, I enjoy survey courses a great deal. The two U.S. histories, I enjoy history of Mexico and Latin America. Dr. Magnaghi and I are the two in the department that have the credentials in Latin America. It's a subfield for me, but a person can certainly teach on a subfield, do I know as much Latin America as I do American history, probably not. That's understandable, but still I think I am quite proficient in Latin America. I enjoy those, I intend on teaching Latin America, Mexico, U.S. surveys, occasionally doing the senior seminar, or Hs 390, or intro to writing.

Q: What are the plans for the future of the history or education department?

A: I don't think the demand for secondary ed. social studies is going to go away, it may go down but enrolment in education programs goes up and down. It's like enrolments in universities goes up and down, and Northern is no exception to that. So you know the numbers might go down temporarily in education, I see the history department as stationary. It's very heavily a service department, with liberal studies program. I see it continuing many good non-teaching majors in history, that some of them will go to graduate school, some of them will go to work in the archives, many of them will carry their history research and communication skills into the world of business and public.

Q: Do you feel that the requirements that the education department to graduate with a history degree is adequate? Is there anything you would like to add or take out of the program?

A: The biggest problem with teaching certifications is that the students never know, they never know content courses especially in social studies. Because it's an umbrella that lends itself to two history courses, two geography courses, two econ, two political science. But there are limitations on adding credits. Realistically what people don't get from the university level, they're going to learn on their own, on the job. That's the way it is, that the way it's been, and that's the way it's going to stay. So I can be very professorial and say "we need this, this, this added". Credit wise I know it's not going to happen and the good teachers are going to learn more content on the job, and that's the way it's been done in the past.

Q: What is your opinion of Michigan requirements for becoming a teacher? Such as the Michigan test for teacher certification and so on.

A: The modern world places a great deal of value in it and believes that it strengthens education. In theory it should, but in reality does it? I think a person could wage the argument that it's problematic at best.

Q: What is your assessment of the history and education departments?

A: Their good, their very strong. My belief based on what I could learn in advanced about Northern and teacher training, the content of the history department when I came here, was that it was strong and it is and it continues to be. The history department secondary ed. social studies training, I would put my products up against anyone regardless of where they received their training; the University of California, the Ivy League, one of the Big Ten schools, small private colleges. Northern's program has exemplified its creed in school. It has been and it continues to be, and I don't see it changing in the future. What you were asking about the state requirements and testing, there are those on the outside world that believe that it makes teacher training stronger. The heart and soul, I say goes on between the instructors and the students, the placement for student teaching, the counseling, the guidance, the advising, and the support that the Northern Students get. That's what I see as the heart and soul of a good program. One of the things that Northern, you guys as the students can hide from the professors. But if you take the initiative to try and dialog with the professors, Northern professors by and large are very receptive to that. At research institutions their not, because they live and breathe their research and their future at their institution is based on publications and has nothing to do with them reaching students.

Q: Out of curiosity, what school would rival Northern in best teacher quality?

A: Well, there are a lot of state institutions in Michigan, that you can argue which one is the best. It's kind of like how people with their cars are viewing, is it Ford trucks better than a Chevy Truck. You know those types of rivalry and opinions. The world of Central Michigan University, Oakland University, Northern, and their all very good, Ferris State is good, Grand Valley is good, Michigan State is pretty good too, and it has a model like ours by the way. Even though it's a large Big Ten institution, Michigan State uses the exact same model as NMU does; Western Michigan uses the same model too. But I think

their programs are pretty good. I'm not saying that the University of Michigan is terrible, it's a different model. Michigan overall is known for its excellent teacher training. Michigan teacher's licenses are valued by other states. Michigan licensees, there are bureaucratic hurdles to clear. Getting a license in other states, but a Michigan license in one of the easier ones because Michigan is known for a quality program, regardless of whether a person's coming out of Northern, Western, or Oakland, etc, Michigan standards are known to be high and it's a reputation I think that is quite correct.

Q: Is there any movement towards a national certification for teachers?

A: There is a national board certification program. States are very jealous of their own power. I don't see states any time in the future giving that power up. They'll sign agreements with other states, so you can have this national board movement, but states there are certain things they want to keep, it's a point of pride. Do you want to give ever decision over to the federal government? There are a lot of folks in Michigan, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and South Dakota. We know the schools and needs of our people of North Dakota better than Washington does. I think the people in Bismarck do. I'm sure the people in every state would make that argument, we know are needs better than Washington. Of course there are some bureaucrats in Washington say Washington knows all, but I don't see the states willingly giving their rights over, unless the Federal Government offers huge amounts of money. And the states go AH, we can save ourselves we won't have that horrible tax burden. What's the possibility that Washington is going to have all this cash to flood the country and be giving money to states to give to public schools, to totally run the picture. Because that's what it would mean if Washington did the certification, then Washington would be responsible for the public schools. I don't see this happening.

Q: Recently I heard a rumor saying that Northern is changing into a research university. Care to justify or disagree with this statement?

A: As I have said earlier Northern's historic mission is teaching. What Northern does very, very well in essence is if a person takes advantage of it, it's the small liberal arts education, which the heart and soul of that is the ability of students to talk to professors one on one. To get that education at Northern and not at a private school cost, at a state institution is a bargain. That's what Northern has done very, very well. That's what its reputation is in its conjunction with teacher training, the same thing again it's the ability to talk with experts who know public schools. My feeling is the historic mission of Northern was and is a good one. I don't know if I would want to race to change that historic mission, that's been a good one for over 100 years.

Q: What is yours and your departments relationship with the AAUP?

A: Yeah the American Association of Union Professors. Every faculty member is given the opportunity to join the union. You can decline but you'll still be assessed the equivalent of union dues, the bottom line is you don't have to belong to the union, but the monetary obligation will be assessed just the same.

Q: Recently I heard that there have been some negotiations between the faculty and the Union over a contract.

A: The faculty had turned down an AAUP contract offer by the administration. So it goes back to the bargaining group, renegotiate, looking at the issues the faculty members identified as being concerns about and trying to address those with further dialoged through the administration then it comes back to the faculty to vote on.