

Interview with Robert Quinn March 22, 2007

Georgeann Jukuri: Could you please state your name, birth date, and position here at Northern?

Robert Quinn: Robert Quinn, September 26, 1956 and my position is interim department head of the department of economic, associate professor.

GJ: Okay thank you. When did you first hear about the possible merger between the departments?

RQ: Mergers have been something that have been talked about long before I ever arrived here, which would have been 6 years ago, and there was all kinds of rumors, the late Howard Swade who was the dept. head here 30 something years ago filled us in on many attempts of merging us with the business school, with other departments and things like that. So we were always a little, when we heard talks about mergers we didn't really believe it because we were never merged. And there was always a rumor that we were going to be merged with geography or political science, or the business school or what have you. We first heard about it, we first thought it was more real, was the time that then president Judy Bailey announced there was going to be sweeping budget cuts. One of the ways they planned on meeting these budget cuts was to merge departments and she basically had a plan. I at the time wasn't on that committee that looked into that, but there were a couple of merger plans that were originally tossed out. The first one was merging history with modern languages and philosophy, and having political science merged with economics and geography. We were very opposed to that for a variety of reasons, one is that the geography dept is in a different building than the political science building, and we were of course in the history department so our preference was to be merged with history because we have had a long standing relationship with the history and we shared a common secretary for how many years. But we didn't want to be merged at all, that was our first choice, and there was lots of rumors and they certainly came to pass when they had a big meeting, in Jamrich I suppose, in the auditorium there, and they had these slides and Judy Bailey and Fred Joyle and various administrators and pretty much just announced that these things were going to happen and there was some small modifications but they did come to pass.

GJ: Okay what was your reaction to the merger? Were you in favor of it?

RQ: Well I am never in favor of a merger because departments and people and people in departments have a lot of pride in their field. And merging with someone in another field, whether we like them or dislike them we're not the same. I think I have a fairly good relationship with all my colleagues in history, I like them all personally, however, we're economists and they're historians. And they're just different things, and that's why we have departments. I've been through mergers before. My previous job was University of N. Dakota. And they

merged our department in with the political science department and that was just a disaster. We liked the people in the political science department. On a personal level, I liked them more than half my colleagues in the economic to be honest, but still, when push came to shove these things always worked the same way. The department with the most faculties has the most votes and people were going to vote with them. In the case of North Dakota, we had 9 faculty members; the political science had 7, so the economist ran the department. They always voted in a block because they have a commonality of training, we got to like them, we say well we're economists what we are what we do and we've got to stick together when somebody from outside comes in to play. So it's just a disaster. It's doomed to failure from the beginning because they're economists and we like to think of ourselves as economists and we're not the business school we don't try to merge, we don't consider ourselves as business people, we think of economics as a much broader field. And interdisciplinary research is one reason they give for this besides the obvious budget cutting, but you can't force interdisciplinary can't be forced by mergers. If you can do it, it's gotta be voluntary you've gotta say hey, you're doing something that's close to what I'm doing, and lets get together and do something together, but you can't say you will do this because it just doesn't work. It's kinda like saying, like an arranged marriage, it obviously doesn't work out the way you want it to.

GJ: How did things changed once the departments were merged?

RQ: Well, for us it didn't change very much. The reason it didn't change very much was because we were merged with history and political science and Dr. Magnaghi was the head of the combined departments. And Dr. Magnaghi had sort of a "hands off" attitude toward the economists. And that's where I sort of became involved because when we were a stand alone department, David Pyrchitko was the dept. head and when we were merged, he decided that he didn't want to be the department head, or have any of the duties of the department head anymore. He had given it to dr. magnaghi, and that was his job and he was supposed to do that. Well, the problem was that, and this happens in every merger case, you can't take a historian and have them plan the schedule for the economics department, just like you can't have an economist plan the schedule for the history department. You know, it's not anything special, but we know what we do, and we have a commonality of training, and they know what they do and they have a commonality of training. Same thing happened at North Dakota. What happened was that initially one person had the whole responsibility of department head and that person had a falling out, and half of the political science things went to the political science people, and that person was essentially and unpaid department head. And they did it because it works better for their life to do it that way. I became the person who was the unpaid department head. I did the schedule; I did a lot of things that were economic specific. Now the beauty of being and unpaid department head, was if I did like it, I could just said it was the paid department heads job. And so I could slough off anything I didn't really want to do, but the things that I wanted to do, I started

picking them up. First the schedule. We needed that. And when somebody comes to the department for a transfer credit we say is this course similar to what we have? Well, to a historian, he doesn't know much about economics, just like I don't know much about history, so he can't say if this is a good transfer credit. Those guys started coming to me and I started advising Russ, Dr. Magnaghi more and more about the economics department. And of course, I wasn't getting paid for this, so that was the downside of it, but we still kept a lot our department in tenure so we didn't see a lot of changes in our ability to (unable to decipher). It would have been potentially worse if we didn't have someone who was as good as Dr. Magnaghi as the department head, allowing us free range. If he was coming in and saying you need to schedule this and that class and you need to teach this and this at this time, I think there would have been a lot of problems. But as it turned out, there wasn't a lot of problems at that particular time, except that someone, who was me, was being asked to do the work of a department head, or a least half of a department head, because I didn't do budgets or things like that, because there was somebody who was actually authorized to do budgets and things like that. But all the other things involved fell on me, and I wasn't getting paid. That wasn't very fair to me and also, I was representing the department, even during the merger, and the department of economics still had a seat on the department head's council and also had a seat on the Three D's which is what I call the provost council where it's all the directors, deans, and department heads. We still had a seat on this thing so we were still representing the economics department there, but again, I was doing it, and I wasn't being paid, I wasn't getting any extra compensation for it. And of course, the thing is, I did most of the stuff, but if I said hey, I don't want to do this, dr. magnaghi would have to deal with it. Of course there wasn't that much business that came up that didn't fall under that category.

GJ: Do you think there were alternatives to the merger that Northern should have taken?

RQ: Well, they shouldn't have merged. And because they are doomed to failure and they always are. They failed in North Dakota. At the end of the day in North Dakota, what happened was that the departments that merged, it wasn't just those two, it was the business school and they merged marketing management and finance accounting and they merged some of the business education departments, and people don't want that structure. That structure doesn't work because in their case it wasn't financial, the dean went to a seminar, and he heard interdisciplinary research, and we gotta make that happen, and he decided this was the way to make it happen and the departments weren't happy about it, and they were trying to get him removed as dean, which they don't have the prerogative to do, but they were trying to go over his head and there was a lot of tension between the departments and it wasn't a very happy situation. Here, merging departments is always a mistake. It didn't end up saving a lot of money for the university at the end of the day. Because even though department heads salaries would have dropped, and the department heads are paid basically a

stipend to be department head, on top of what you are paid to be a teacher. So these stipends were dropped for the people that were removed, like political science and economics, those stipends were removed and they saved that money, but some of that money went to pay the department head of the whole group because he had more responsibility now, instead of supervising 6 faculty members as I do, including myself, there was like 25 or something, I'd have to count, in the combined 4 departments. And so, that was hard on him. I heard that the new department head received a raise, which reflected his responsibility, so I heard at the end of the day there was very little financial savings. That was just a combination, what I thought was a combination, save. Turned out that was a mistake. Because people are going to be in departments, whether you recognize them or not. And even when I was in a community college, I was part time associate at a community college when I was a graduate student, and they had a combined department of history and economics. And even though the person that hired me was a history professor, I never really talked to him beyond that first interview. When I had questions, when I wanted to know what was expected of me, I went to the people in the economics department. You're going to get that kind of thing, whether its research service or whatever, because of that commonality of training. So they don't work, and if they are forced, I felt sure it would break apart as soon as the financial picture cleared a little bit and other departments that were of course merged, like physics into math, and chemistry into biology also fought very hard to get that de-merged through the union and things like that. And so eventually I think the administration just decided that they were tired of angry faculty members. They weren't really saving a lot of money that way and they were just making faculty members angry for what I thought was no purpose. So just as fast as they came, they were gone.

GJ: Do you think that your colleagues were happy that the merger ended?

RQ: I think they were. I think they were. I don't think that we had the same kind of strife that the other departments had with the mergers, but I think that was only because of the way Dr. Magnaghi handled the economics department, which was basically giving us a certain amount of autonomy, within the merger structure. But intellectually speaking, I think we were all happy to be our own department, because we feel that we are a group of people with a common intellectual interest. And that is economics. It's not history, it's not business, it's not political science, it's economics. And we wanted to be a department of economics. We don't want to be a department of four or five or six other areas, and we call it social studies, or social sciences, and we could put in basically what we were here, and even when you see that, you think the people in departments, I always wonder how the business school is not pressured to bust out into different departments, except they are all pretty small. Because I know a lot of people, the mergers hurt, I think in recruiting. Because when we had to recruit a candidate and we had to say the guy that will make the decision is a historian you'll meet him because he won't know economics because he's never had a class. I think that hurt us a little in recruiting faculty, and it hurts you a little bit in

things for publication, you have your professional address, and it says department of economics that's sort of saying that the university you work at values economics enough as a stand alone department, not just as a part of something else. I think you get a slightly better read as a result of that. (unable to decipher). So all of those things people like being a part of. We have fought for 40 years against being gobbled up, because we have always been small and we are a tasty little morsel for somebody, they say well why do you have just 6 people? But the department head gets paid considerably less than the department head of say 25-30 people. I don't make the same kind of extra salary as department head as does the department head of English. And the reason for that is he has 35 faculty members plus a large graduate program. He is doing considerably more work. So he gets paid more money, that makes sense. But they still have the commonality of English, they still have that same basic training within that field. They are all English ph.d's and they have that experience. So anyway...

GJ: I really don't have any more questions, just if there is any last comments you would like to make about the merger?

RQ: Just, it was something that I've seen happen at other schools, it usually are doomed to failure, unless you get people that want to be merged, for some particular reason, I personally doubt it. I've been through a merger, another school I worked at, the mergers did stick, the stuck primarily because the economics department, the people there, I still think one day they will wind up de-merging in the future but it's just the time might not be right for them to do that but there's always a certain amount of animosity between the two groups, and it usually does wind up with both departments doing having their own people doing the job and one person gets the extra money and the extra prestige and one person ends up doing it for nothing. But they do it because they don't want the other guy doing it. And again, I think it hurts the way we are presented outside you know, for a combined department you know, I went to interview for a job, the department of general business of economics at another university, and I turned it down because (unable to decipher) because they must not be a very good department. That was my rationale at the time because the department, the name, and the fact that half of the problem is that people (unable to decipher). So why do I want to affiliate with you? And I turned the job down. And that was not the only reason, the money wasn't right as well, but still it was a consideration that I looked at. I would always have a preference for being in a stand along department rather than a merged department. I have a lot of pride in being an economist, it took me a lot of time to accumulate all of the degrees that I got to do it, and everything else being equal, I prefer having our own little unit all the time. I would feel very victimized (unable to decipher) just hypothetically, would you be interested in being the head of the combined departments? And my answer was absolutely not. I was not willing to do it, no matter how much money it was because I can't really represent political science. I don't know much about their traditions, I never took a political science class, I don't know what their goals

are, what it means to be a political scientist. Same thing with history. I never took a history class in my life, I have no idea what their traditions are. So how can I represent those two groups effectively to the university. Well I couldn't. I think I could represent what economist want, and what we believe and how we perceive things, and bring that voice to department heads groups, or dean directors and department heads group but I certainly don't think I could speak for history or political science so I really would have had no interest in being the so called combined department head and I think Russ did a great job because it was a very difficult job because you have to (unable to decipher). There's always a tendency to say Russ isn't an economist, he's not going to have the same perspective as we have. So I think he did an excellent job as the combined head. It wasn't that I didn't like him. I didn't like the concept of a combined department head. (unable to decipher) At one time, all of what we think of as economics history, sociology and political science were one thing called social studies or something to that effect, social sciences. And then history sort of says well we're a little different and we'll break off and we're going to do our history thing, and later on the political scientists sort of break off, and then the last two was sociology and economics and they sort of broke off into their own little groups, and now to a certain degree you have finance broken off of economics as a separate group. And so you image over time, as you learn more and the field becomes bigger, the people who have these commonalities are going to tend to cluster together and the people who have other commonalities are going to cluster together and then one day you're going to have a separate department. And so you see that occasionally. I believe that Cornell has a separate department of labor economics. That's a strength of theirs, they have clustered themselves off together. Well, its hard to bring back together once you are used to being separate and I don't think it's something we would want to have, that it's a desirable goal. I've always been against these mergers personally, and I don't think that anyone's in favor. Of all the people here I never had anyone tell me that it was great to be merged, we really want this. I've heard in the business school that they do want to be merged as a single department, not have a department of finance, managing, marketing whatever. And of course that's the way they feel as a group, and that's they way they want, that's fine, but for us, I think because we are sort of an older discipline, economics is a much older discipline that say business and things like that, we value our traditions much more. And we don't like to be merged into what is most often a hostile environment in terms of that we don't like to be. There might be some people, obviously not everybody (unable to decipher). Those people do fight for their department's integrity and I've been in a lot of schools and they've had these merger things come up because the administration thinks they can save a few dollars here, a few dollars there but usually at the end of the day they don't save any money. I don't know the actual financial workings about how much money we saved versus not but I know the faculty as a whole in the merged departments were very angry and there were a number of committees and groups that were formed for the purpose of bring our case to the union and the administration and eventually I guess it worked because I attended a meeting

with the provost and all of my colleagues in this department and I think they were generally shocked at how much we did not want this and were not going to accept this and were planning to fight for however long it took. And I think they realized that we were just a little too dug in and that it was probably better to just give it up, I don't know, I don't know what their motivation was. It was one of those mystery things to me. One day it was announced that the departments would be put back together to the way they were and that's, I don't know what caused it or the reasons or anything, it was an administrative decision. The administration asked our input, we gave it to them. And they decided, based on our input and other factors, which I do not know, to restore the departments and I think that everybody was happy about that decision. At least everyone in economics was happy, and I'm sure that everyone in political science and history were too. Except for maybe Russ, who lost some of his stipend. I think he was probably happy to in a way because (unable to decipher) you don't want that, and if you can avoid it, it's easy to avoid. So that's it.

GJ: Okay thank you.

RQ: Alright.