

Interview with Bonnie Ellis:

Title: West Virginia Northern Community College

Date: June 27, 1994; **Interview #:**

Gordon Swartz: The first thing we need to know is your name and position and the date.

Bonnie Ellis: Well, my name is **Bonnie Ellis**; and I'm the Associate Dean for Student Development at West Virginia Northern Community College; and today is November 17, 1994.

Gordon Swartz: Could you give me some of your personal background?

Bonnie Ellis: Yes, I went to undergraduate school at West Virginia University with an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education; and then I went to graduate school at Ohio University in Athens; and there I had an Assistantship in the residence halls; and that was the point at which I decided I liked working with college students. And, so, from Ohio University I went and ran residence halls at the University of Illinois in Champaign; and then when I left there I was an Assistant Dean of Women at West Liberty State College with my major responsibility being the women's dormitories and training the staff and developing the programming in the residence halls at West Liberty. And then one year after West Virginia Northern was created, West Virginia Northern was created in 1972, one year after that in 1973, I came to West Virginia Northern. Now when I started here I was the counselor, and at that time we had the Wheeling and the Weirton Campus. So I drove two or three days a week to Wheeling and two or three days a week to Weirton; and, then when we got the New Martinsville Campus, I started driving to the New Martinsville Campus. At that point then we had gotten a counselor in Weirton, and so I was the Wheeling and New Martinsville counselor, and then when we got a full time New Martinsville counselor then I became the full time Wheeling counselor, and have, since then I was full time Wheeling counselor for a long time, and then I became the Assistant Dean for Student Services, and just last year got more responsibilities with the Associate Dean for Student Development. And, basically, what that means is, I'm still counseling and still try to coordinate all the other counselors that we have, try to help them in their programming and their professional development and what they provide for students. I also have responsibility for the registration processing. Now we have a registrar here at West Virginia Northern who's responsible for the registrar duties, that is, preparing the schedule and all that kind of stuff; but I have to make sure it happens. I have to make sure that there are people there to register students, that the right materials are there, that they have the right information, that they know how to run the computer equipment. I also have responsibility for student activities. Don Chamberlain, of course, is the director of that, but he reports to me. I have responsibility for career and special services. We do career services. We help students find jobs. We help them write resumes. We help them do interviews. We also have to work with students with disabilities, trying to make sure that their accommodations are here, that everything is accessible, classrooms accessible, lab

experiences are accessible, the buildings are accessible; and he works with them too if there needs to be special testing situations; he works with that. We've bought quite a number of pieces of equipment with large screens for computer terminals. He's helping the students with disabilities learn to use that equipment. We have readers that help students who have eye problems; it enlarges the letters. Well, Mr. Witcherly, who is our coordinator in that area, helps students learn to use that equipment and become familiar that it's here. A lot of time students with disabilities don't know we have this, special things to help them; and, if we don't have it, we look for resources in the community that can help. I'm trying to think what else. Oh, also, I am the supervisor for Dee Davis who is our tutor here on campus. She provides special tutoring services for students. I think that's all.

GS: Is that all? Sounds like quite a load.

BE: Yeah. But we have a lot of good people here at Northern that really work hard. We've always been a college that, we haven't always had some of the resources that some of the colleges have had in the state, but we've had super people who make up for that.

GS: You started practically at the same time the college did.

BE: Right.

GS: Within a year?

BE: Yes, within a year. When I started we were in the Hazel-Atlas Building, and I teased them for a while because they didn't know what to do with me. I said every week I came in and my office was in a different place. We were on the fourth floor of the Hazel-Atlas Building, and they really hadn't figured out what to do with Student Services and Counseling and all that stuff, and I bet my office changed six times in the first year. But, you know, as time went on and we figured out where things went, then I finally got settled. Of course, when we went to Weirton we were at Weir High School and we were sharing space with the high school there; and that was a very interesting experience. We were only able to have evening classes; because, of course, the high school had the facilities all full during the day. When we went to New Martinsville, the city provided a tiny little building for us on a corner someplace; and my desk was in the hallway of the building that we had in New Martinsville; but things have progressed since then.

GS: I thought it had been in existence longer than that; because I went here back in '74, I think, to that Coal Mining Technology they had.

BE: Yes, I remember that program. Really, there had been a downtown center of West Liberty, but it just became separate and autonomous in '72, but for quite a number of years before that there was a West Liberty Downtown Center. [\[Return to Top\]](#)

GS: Well, to get right into this. You've had an influx of nontraditional students here lately, I believe.

BE: Right.

GS: Just what programs are here? What groups are here?

BE: Right now we have Shoemaker, Windsor, Ireland, Blaw Knox. We have coming in Knight Engineering, the few that are going to be coming in in January. We have more Ireland have just gotten laid off, the Ireland that we have here were from a couple years ago layoff. So the Ireland will be new ones coming in in January. And then you always have a few, these are the bigger groups, but you always have one, or two, or three, that are being sponsored by some JTPA or trade readjustment act people. We have a gentleman who's going to be coming in to the Culinary Arts program, and he's a laid off worker from Pennsylvania, and he's going to start in January in the Culinary Arts and his is trade readjustment act, even though it's much like the JTPA.

GS: That's what I was wondering. These ones that you; Blaw Knox, are they on the Clean Air Act or what act are they, the readjustment?

BE: I don't think so. When I talk to Charleston, now, Charleston is coordinating all this, it sounds to me like the folks in Charleston have worked and you would maybe, Mark Uraco could tell you maybe more about that because he has direct contact with Charleston, and he's located in the Hazel-Atlas Building, and he is a Blaw Knox worker. Do you know Mark?

GS: No.

BE: Well, he was a Blaw Knox worker, and he is now being employed by Charleston JTPA to help our present Blaw Knox workers through some of the bureaucracy. How can I get new eyeglasses? You know, what do I need to do to get my equipment? Those kinds of questions.

GS: I know that's on the tape, but let me.

BE: Mark. M-A-R-K. And it's U-R-A-C-O.

GS: He might be a man I really want to talk to.

BE: Right. And he can find out exactly where these funds are coming from. When I talked to them, they said Department of Labor, but it's not really Clean Act, Clean Air Act. I don't think the Clean Air Act really affected Blaw Knox; but, again, I don't know.

GS: There's people displaced because of NAFTA that are getting training in some places.

BE: Right. And from what I can tell by talking with the folks in Charleston, they are really being diligent in trying to work with Washington to write grant proposals to get us and our workers anything that we could possibly be eligible for. They seem to be working all the time with the Department of Labor and everybody else, and with the Senators and anybody else that they can work with to pull in any of these funds that our folks might be eligible for.

GS: I think since they've learned the ropes they are doing a very good job.

BE: Right.

GS: It's hard for them to get started with all the red tape.

BE: Right. And, of course, some of the Blaw Knox guys didn't get their checks on time, and that was frustrating, but it was everybody learning their jobs.

GS: I know that when Shoemaker came in you had to set up special classes and special programs. Have you had to do that?

BE: No, because, thank goodness, so far, everybody else has. There are "x" number of days, whatever those days are that is determined by the federal government that you have to be in classes by. So, but that's why the Blaw Knox guys were so, I should say not guys, there were some women, the Blaw Knox workers were so rushed, because we had a summer session starting exactly at the end of their period. Our summer session started July 5, and that almost coincided exactly with the end of their period of time to get enrolled. And then we had thought we were going to have to start some special classes for Ireland, because they were originally told they were going to be off some date, I can't remember what it was, but, anyway, that got pushed back. And now they can come in with the regular student population on January 17. Originally, they thought they were going to be laid off early October. Yeah, no, they thought they were going to be laid off September 27, which meant we would have had to start a special program for them, but we didn't because it got pushed back.

GS: You named the groups. How about the amount, the number of students?

BE: Right now. When we started with Shoemaker, before they went back to work, there were about 98 of them; and, of course, now they've gone back to work. Now right now, now this was a count I did a couple weeks ago, it fluctuates because they do get jobs and they do go in and out; but we had about 86 Blaw Knox, 13 Windsor, 10 Shoemaker, 5 Ireland, now this is old Ireland, and about 11 Workers' Comp that I could identify. It's hard for me to identify some of these folks. This was when I did a survey, I'd say around November 1, around that first week of November was when I surveyed. These things change daily.

GS: Northern seems to have made a real effort to accommodate these people. Some of the other places haven't. Why are they making a special effort?

BE: Well, as a community college, we feel that's part of our mission. That's what you do. You respond to what our community needs. Back in the olden age, you remember OSHA, when that came on, when those became requirements that all these people get trained for OSHA, those classes were in. When everybody was needing mine foreman certification, you were one of those, okay, those classes were put in immediately. So, that's one of the things in the mission of a community college, respond to community needs, and so we try to do that when we're aware.

GS: How are the students responding? How do they fit in with the rest of the, I mean they're nontraditional, older, that's usually what you mean by nontraditional.

BE: Right. Well I hope that you'll take some time to even talk to some of the students. I think they're doing great and they, now the ones that are happy come in and tell me. Now if there are

unhappy ones out there, then they're not telling me. But I have them come in daily and tell me how well they're fitting in, how well the other students are accepting them. They sit around and have coffee and chat together. They help each other with their homework. I ran into a fellow in the grocery store a couple of weeks ago. He says, "Bonnie, I'm making B's. I never made B's before in my life. I'm so pleased with myself." And I've had fellows come up and say to me, "Bonnie, now I know I'm not a dumb coal miner." And so, I feel like for the majority of the people, number one, they're doing very well. The faculty have been very complimentary, and the students I talk to are pleased with themselves because they are accomplishing when they thought they couldn't. I ran into another guy; I went to visit a friend at the hospital; and he's sitting in the lobby; and he says, "Bonnie, you can't believe," he says, "I brought out my Writing Skills class notes," he says, "I brought out my one from my first class, and I brought out my last one," he says, "I couldn't believe I made such progress in six weeks." So, they are surprising themselves, and the faculty I have talked with are very pleased. Now, there's always a minority who are, number one, they're struggling with the classes, and number two, don't like anything or anybody. But I think a lot of those folks are still grieving about having lost their jobs and their position in life and having to go back to school and so on and so forth, and that's normal, that's a normal human reaction. You're going to grieve about that loss.

GS: But that is a minority?

BE: A very small minority. And, then, I had another gentleman that was just in my office two hours ago. He's doing very well in his classes, but he's still grieving. He's still going through that grieving process, and he's undecided. At 48 he didn't want to have to choose another career, but he's doing well in his classes. So, he comes in a lot for reinforcement, because he's still nervous about, number one, can he do it even though he's proven he can? And, number two, is he really taking the classes he wants to take?

GS: Along that line, are they getting trained for jobs that are going to be there?

BE: Right. I wish I could say yes and feel more confident about that. I don't feel real confident about it, except for two things. Because of my position as counselor I read the newspaper, the want ads, every weekend; and it appears to me that they're getting a little longer in Wheeling. There seems to be more out there. And that's unscientific. And I read a study the other day that said that Wheeling was number nineteen in the country for your growing job opportunities. Now where they got this, I don't know; and Zack Witcherly has the article, and I'm going to have him make a copy and bring it to me, but I don't have it yet. But how we can be number nineteen in the country for growing job opportunities, I'm not sure where they got that, but I do worry, because we've got 20-some people in Refrigeration-Air Conditioning. Where are we going to put those folks? Now we've got quite a number of people in Culinary Arts, and everybody knows that everybody's eating out nowadays, so probably they'll be able to find something in that, but I do worry about what the job opportunities are going to be in our area. Now, if they're willing to move, there are more opportunities out there. All of the career literature says that the growing job opportunities are in Associate Degrees. Yes, they're going to need those of us with Bachelors, and yes, they're going to need those of us with Masters, but they're going to need more people with Associates than they're going to need of us.

GS: These Associate Degrees, just what is offered here? You said Culinary Arts, Refrigeration. What other courses are they in? Are they in every one of them?

BE: They're in every one of them. I've got some in Pre-Health. Well, I've got a couple that already got into Nursing, because they had seen the handwriting on the wall, and they started taking classes before their company went down. They're in Nursing this semester. I've got some in Pre-Health. I've got some in Computers and Information Processing. I've got some in Associate in Arts and Associate in Science, because they want to transfer and get a Bachelors. I've got quite a number in Human Services, and that's interesting to me because that is a major growing field. I've got some in Secretarial Science, so they really have spread themselves out. I can't show you the names, because they wouldn't like that. But this is, let me show you, Computers, Major Appliance, Computers, Refrigeration-Air Conditioning, Electronics, Culinary Arts, Electronics, Nursing. They very much spread themselves out, except there are a disproportionate number in the Refrigeration-Air Conditioning. Now, I guess you could fix your own stuff and your family's stuff or start your own business; but I do worry if there are enough places to really; you know, you can go to Sears and you can go to Reicharts. Now the hospitals, the big buildings need the refrigeration-air conditioning kinds of people. But I worry about that. Here's one in Business Administration, Computers, Computers, so you can see they've really spread themselves out, Business, Secretarial. I've got one I know that's in Accounting because I just talked to him. I was surprised about the Culinary Arts, that it was so popular.

GS: And you believe there are jobs in Culinary Arts.

BE: Well, our area is growing in Tourism. Somebody's feeding those tourists. So I'm hoping that the jobs are going to be there; I really am. Here's one that's thinking about a transfer. So you see my point. They're all over the place.

GS: All of these plans, they're all for just two years?

BE: Right. Right. But I'm hoping that something, either that they'll be able to continue with Pell Grants or something when they get close enough; but, yes, the federal government has said two years. This is something that has worried me since President Clinton and everybody says two years, because I've been around long enough to know that it's really hard to do any of these in two years, because 99 percent of the people need some brush-up classes. So that's going to put you behind a semester. And most adult students can't; you only can get out of these in two years if you can take 16 to 18 credits every semester. Most folks can't do that. Now if you talk to some of the Blaw Knox guys and so on, they do have 18, 19, I signed for a couple 20 hours which worries me, but they say they can do it because they were electricians so taking an electric class is a review for them and so on. But most of them are staying at 12 hours. You can't graduate in two years with 12 hours.

GS: I'm taking 12 hours. That's all I can handle.

BE: Well, and you're in a graduate program. I don't know that, I think somebody would stand on their head if you took more than 12 hours.

GS: Right.

BE: So.

GS: Well. Okay. Go ahead. Sorry.

BE: That's okay. You got the point that they're spread out all over the place. They haven't just all said they're going to do one thing.

GS: Well, how many have dropped out, a big percentage?

BE: I don't know how many have dropped out, but I'd say ten to fifteen percent.

GS: Oh, is that all?

BE: Not very many?

GS: I figured it would be a lot more.

BE: Even some of the fellows who got jobs have worked it out with JTPA to continue taking classes, a class or two. This gentleman right here. He's already working, but he wants to continue with his Algebra. I would have dropped my Algebra. But he's going to take Algebra next semester, and they're going to pay for him to be able to continue. Now they're not going to pay his needs related payments, but they're going to pay his tuition and books. Now how more flexible can you ask for to be. I have several folks this semester who have already gotten other jobs, but they wanted to continue their refrigeration class or their appliance repair class.

GS: (Tape recorder adjustment) I don't know if it will make a noise when it.

BE: Okay, let me turn it a little bit, so that we both.

GS: I want you to be able to talk into the microphone. I don't mean to distract you.

BE: That's okay. So we have lost some. One or two we assessed, and we felt they absolutely could not perform at the college level, and so we did send them to RESA 6, and I don't know what they're doing there, but I know that they have some additional and different kind of training that they're working with those folks.

GS: I'd like to talk to the RESA people and see, because I know there were some people that had dropped out in grade school.

BE: Right.

GS: They're not dumb.

BE: No, but they just need more developmental work than our folks are prepared to give them.

GS: You had a lot of extra work thrown on you all at once here at this place, a lot of paperwork, didn't you?

BE: We did, but I was real proud of the staff. You know they jumped right in and did it, and every now and then, like normal human beings, humped and grumped, but they did it.

GS: You haven't had to hire any extra people.

BE: No extra people.

GS: Wow.

BE: Unfortunately.

GS: You'd like to have some though.

BE: That's right.

GS: Nobody has graduated yet, have they, that's on any of these programs?

BE: No, but I'm hoping that some folks who might be ready to graduate may still take classes for the two years just to get the whole thing. So, to my knowledge, none of these folks have applied for graduation. You know the student has to take the initiative to apply, and we've got signs all over the place saying, "apply now."

GS: Most of them haven't been in it for two years.

BE: Right, right. But if somebody was like you and needed a course or two to graduate, they could; but, to my knowledge, they haven't.

GS: Might as well take the two years.

BE: Right.

GS: I see what you're saying now.

BE: But I've got some that are really determined.

GS: Did you make, what special accommodations did you make for these students besides, I know you had to start maybe an extra semester?

BE: We started some extra sections of classes, because we didn't have enough spaces; and, in talking with the students, most of them said, "Early, early, early, Bonnie. Please, early." And, so, if you'll notice, this semester we've got some eight o'clock classes that we never had before, and that was in a direct response to the request that we put them on early rather than late, and then we did have, we've tried, we've always had the college survival class, which is a study skills class,

but it had a little better attendance this year than it has in the past because of these workers, and we've had in the past the career awareness class, but it has never had enough people until these workers went into it. So those were two things we've had before, but our general population of students have not taken advantage of them but this influx of laid off workers did take advantage of them. So we will be putting those on the schedule again next semester; but, as you can see, when we added two writing skills sections, one was eight o'clock in the morning, one was at nine thirty, this was an early morning electricity class. So when we added classes we tried. Oh, here was another writing skills we had to add at eight o'clock in the morning. We tried to add them early, because that's what they requested. We did offer a summer skills training program. Now this was already in the works and already being offered, but I did find that my laid off workers took great advantage of it. It's called SOAR, Student Orientation Advising Registration. It's an enrichment program in the summer where you get some reading, some writing, some arithmetic, and some computers. We had the best attendance at that program this summer ever, because these students took advantage of them. I even had one fellow ask me.

GS: An all around course.

BE: Uh-huh. It lasted one week. It was two hours a day for four days. I even had one student ask me if he could bring his wife. I said, "Sure. Bring her." And got lots of positive feedback, because it was a one week period, they had to spend just two hours a day, there were no grades, no pressure. It was just a matter of come in and get the information, and it was study skills, math, writing, a little bit of Algebra; and then so many of these folks. You know, they're forties, fifties, have never had their hands on a computer. This was a way to get your hands on a computer in a nonthreatening atmosphere, and they loved it. Everyone of these sessions went over, because they stayed and they asked the instructor questions. The ones who took advantage of it seemed to really get a lot out of it. And, as I say, we have this every year; but it never has been as well attended as it was this year; because these folks took advantage of it.

GS: What's your ideas about what's going to happen in Wheeling? You mentioned tourism earlier.

BE: Right, and I see our, you know, I see the city government and everybody really working hard. I just hope they're successful in bringing in. To me, Wheeling is a wonderful place to live. You know, we've got great park systems, we've got great school systems, we've got great cultural systems, we've got wonderful road systems. I could be the roving ambassador for Wheeling, because I think it's a great place to live, but I feel like we still need some more job opportunities, and hope that some of these projects everybody's working on is going to pan out some more.

GS: Tourism, for example.

BE: Tourism, right, and like the Millennium Center and places that are bringing in some of the high tech jobs; and, you know, Wheeling Nissan keeps saying they're going to add; and the, what is it, over at the stamping place over in Shadyside, they say they're going to add.

GS: Yeah. I know where you're talking about.

BE: Motor Panels.

GS: Motor Panels.

BE: Motor Panels. They keep saying they're going to add. So I just hope that all these initiatives do work out, and we can continue to grow because its a great place.

GS: It does appear that steel mills and coal mines are going down. Something else has to come up.

BE: Right, and I was pleased to hear.

GS: I'm not supposed to say my opinion. You're supposed to say yours.

BE: Well, no, that's okay. I was pleased to see the Kammer Plant got a year's reprieve. I hope that that's going to, in the meantime they'll be able to figure out something, but you think, "Oh, in a year, is that going to have to go down." And what does that mean. I never thought Windsor'd go out at all, because they were providing, you know, they had a specific market; but.

GS: They were what they called a "captive mine." That's what I thought, too. That's about all the questions I have. You got anything you'd like to.

BE: No. I guess one thing I could say is that I really feel that a community college is a great asset to a community, because it does respond to all levels of students. All the literature, career literature, that I read says that we're all going to have to be retrained two and three times. It used to be we'd get one job and stick with it for life. That's not the way it is now; and so, I'm hoping that the community college can help the community respond to whatever these needs are and change as we need to change. As you can see from the January schedule, there's another, they've got another language in computers. You have to look; this year we had Visual Basic. That was brand new. Then, here's another one, C Programming. The world is changing so fast, and we're all just going to have to be prepared to learn and learn and relearn. I love my typewriter. They're threatening me to throw it away. They bought me a PC, and I darn well better learn it. And so, we're all just going to be in a changing world, and I think education is the key to help us do that. We used to be very local. When I came to West Lib in 1968, most of those kids had never been out of this valley. I became the cheerleading sponsor, and I would take those kids to all the ball games around. None of them had ever been to Charleston. They saw the Kanawha River and thought it was the Ohio. We can't be satisfied with that anymore. We're a world economy. We have to understand world cultures. Right now you go to other; when I read my counseling literature, I hear about all the Hispanics, all the Asians, and all these folks come into their communities. In Wheeling we have a very small African-American community. We have almost nothing Hispanic, almost nothing Asian. And then are our students going to be prepared when they move to Pittsburgh or Chicago or Columbus and have to encounter all these cultures? How do you do that? Education. You be prepared to encounter all these cultures. Because we're not, we're not a small world any more.

GS: Very well put. We do have a rich ethnic background here, but it's a different.

BE: Right. Right. We have wonderful, you know, German and Italian and Polish, but that's not enough any more, not enough any more. When we have our courses like the World Community, people need to know that's an incredibly important course. So that when you get out, you can read the newspaper and understand what's the GATT. You know, what is this, and what is NAFTA? We need to understand that. So I hope that helps a little.

GS: That helps a whole lot, and it's still running. I didn't time when we started. That's supposed to be a 90-minute, I guess it's 45 on each side. That's what I was thinking. It seemed like we were talking longer than 45.

BE: I hope it got all of it.

GS: It's still running, so.

BE: Okay. And if you need me, call me.

GS: Okay. You said you were from, when I talked to you on the phone, said you were from Boone County?

BE: Yessir. Madison. Grew up in Madison, and my family's all still there. I go back every holiday.

GS: My aunt's from Racine.

BE: Oh, I go up through Racine a million times. Used to be to get, you know, you talk about the world getting smaller. Used to be, to go from Madison to Charleston, it was up and down and around and over; and now they've got a four-lane highway. So we don't go through Racine anymore. We go the other way.

End